

On What ‘Esoteric’ Could Mean in the Twenty-First Century

Anthony Blake

Abstract

The word *esoteric* (Greek, ‘of the inner circle’) signals a type of information that only an elite can access. In this sense, the term first appeared in the second century CE in a satire by the Greek writer Lucian of Samosata (c. 125-180 CE), *The Sale of Philosophers*. The esoteric can appear sublime or ridiculous and has a diversity of interpretations. It has acquired, broadly, three meanings. First, as the knowledge of a *privileged* minority. Second, as knowledge inaccessible to the majority as it demands special, *rare abilities* as, for example, in mathematics. Third, as a *knowledge of spiritual reality* hidden from ‘fallen’ or ‘sleeping’ humans. There are more possible associations, and we are mindful that any idea of the esoteric and its meanings is always seen from a particular point of view: ideological, religious, or political. It is usually accepted that the esoteric looks different from the ‘inside’ or the ‘outside.’ The esoteric and the exoteric minded will likely see each other as dysfunctional or irrational.¹

Keywords: Esotericism, spiritual reality, inner circle, awakening, higher knowledge

Introduction

The concept of an inner circle may have great antiquity, reaching back through speculations about the existence of ‘superior beings’ involved in the first appearance and evolution of the human species. Nearly all early cultures have stories that speak of gifts of higher knowledge from higher agencies. In the relatively recent times in which monotheistic religions arose, such ideas have been transposed into such images as that of angels or, more recently, extraterrestrials.² We distinguish an inner circle from the operations of lone mystics or seers. An essential feature of an inner circle is that its members communicate with and know each other. These connections are often said to be telepathic rather than by external means. The esoteric points to a *community* of understanding.³ We might think of the scientific community as an example, even though this is rarely addressed in studies of esotericism. It is important to note that spiritual ‘inner circles’ are said to extend over long periods of time, even for thousands of years stretching back to prehistory (before writing).

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¹ This article reworks and expands upon Anthony Blake, ‘Supplementary Essay: Understanding What is Esoteric’, *Correspondences*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2020), pp. 1-25. At: https://correspondencesjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/19899_20537158_blaake.pdf.

² Ki-Eun Jang, ‘The Problems of Sons of Gods, Daughters of Humans, and the Nephilim in Genesis 6:1-4: A Reassessment’, *Religions* 16 (2025). At: <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/16/8/972>.

³ For example, G. I. Gurdjieff told P. D. Ouspensky “One man can do nothing, can attain nothing. A group with a real leader can do more. A group of people can do what one man can never do...” See P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt, 2001 [1949]), p. 30.

Of great significance for the study of the esoteric is the role played by language. To take an example from modern science, the emergence and adoption of the term *energy* around 1840 signified a discovery worked out and refined over centuries that then contributed to the making of the modern world. At the same time, the mathematical language of physics rapidly developed to become essential. We will find that the esoteric or true version of things often involves mathematics of some kind and is not just verbal. But we should make it clear that the scientific community contrasts strongly with the standard picture of the esoteric elite, in that the latter is idealised into a corpus of agreement that is essentially *static*. Most descriptions of the esoteric fit a ‘perennial philosophy,’ an unchanging, fully-realised explanation of the universe and humanity.⁴ For the last two millennia or so, arguably the emergence of new ideas and ways of thinking have necessitated the destruction, or at least neglect, of early certainties.

In the history of science, it is clear that uncertainty and hazard are integral to the discoveries that have been made, established, and put to use. Pioneers are typically neglected or scorned by the entrenched establishment. Disagreements flare up with considerable rancour, and I have even gone so far as to suggest that polemics are at the heart of science. Scientists can denounce each other as fools or madmen (as happened to nineteenth-century German mathematician Georg Cantor)⁵ or even obscene (as was the case with physicist Erwin Schrödinger). Science ventures into new territory, whereas traditional esotericism claims it already has in its grasp the very nature of things. The spiritual maverick G. I. Gurdjieff (c. 1877-1949) comes closest to combining the two in his dramatic portrayal of scientists on Saturn, for example, or of angels involved in improving the technology of spaceships, and ancient brotherhoods described as research bodies.⁶

The form of language used is pertinent to understanding the esoteric. This can be seen in the case of Plato. It appears to have been one of his tasks to develop a form of writing distinct from the Rhapsody of previous times, exemplified in the works of Homer, where recitation, rhythm, imagery and so on manifested a world of meaning. Plato was creating a language of philosophy, involving reason and principles, not heroes and gods; though his mentor Socrates denounced writing in general as too fixed to afford dialogue. However, besides the unsurpassed masterpieces we know as the *Dialogues*, Plato is said to have various ‘hidden teachings’ which never became available to the general public and, it seems, have vanished from history. Why were these writings – if they ever existed – to be kept hidden? One explanation is they challenged the establishment and authorities, as Socrates found to his cost.

Another is that they demanded a level of intellect that was rare. As we know, in the *Republic* Plato says, explicitly, that we have to create myths for the general public because they cannot understand the truth directly.⁷ This was echoed in the Gospels: Jesus explains that he has to teach in parables to the laity and can only be direct to his disciples. The Gospels, we

⁴ René Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, rev. and ed. Martin Lings (Cambridge: Quinta Essentials, 1995).

⁵ Kenneth Binmore, ‘Georg Cantor versus Bertrand Russell’, in *Imaginary Philosophical Dialogues between Sages down the Ages* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021), pp. 123-128.

⁶ G. I. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson* (New York: Penguin Arkana, 1999 [1950]).

⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Christopher Rowe (London: Penguin, 2013). Plato uses traditional myths – the story of Gyges (*Republic* 359d–360b) and the story of the Noble Lie (*Republic* 414b–415d), which combines the autochthony myth of Cadmos and Hesiod’s myth of ages – and also original myths like the myth of Er (*Republic* 621b).

should remember, were written in a context influenced by Gnosticism with its multitude of alternative visions and explanations of the human predicament and salvation.

Some scholars have interpreted the dialogues as expressive of Pythagorean ideas. This is seen particularly in the work of Ernest McClain, whom we will speak more of later, but the essence is that Plato structured his dialogues and his explanations according to harmonic theory. We might add that it has taken more than 1500 years for the decay of knowledge of the meaning of Greek texts due to the Christian destruction of centres of learning, to be rectified.⁸

Mentioning of science, philosophy, and the development of composition in writing suggest that the esoteric, in a broad sense, is a matter of intelligence. Intelligence is more than knowledge because it can discover and use new knowledge, and is far more than a repetition of information. Or, we might say that the role of the esoteric is not just preservation of past insight, but has the possibility of pointing people towards where they can *dig and discover it for themselves*. In yet a deeper sense, the esoteric is *higher intelligence*; that is to say, an active source of new insight. William James in his masterly *Varieties of Religious Experience* abstracts the general foundation of religions in the two propositions: 1) we are defective in some way, and 2) we can overcome these defects, but only with help from a higher source. The quest is on, so to speak, to find an actual way of communicating with higher intelligence.⁹

As Gurdjieff and some alchemists have asserted, this may involve undergoing ‘ordeals of understanding.’ That is, struggling with things that do not seem to make sense; because one does not understand by being told, only through a kind of *work*. The idea that a text in itself could enlighten someone remains unlikely. However, note that in most traditions, as far as we know, the essential thing was to recite the Scriptures or enact them *exactly* in pilgrimage and ceremony, as in Homeric or Vedic times. The gods were in part forms of social cohesion. It was then inevitable that writing releasing individual creativity involved denying the gods and nourished belief in the individual soul, which was realised in both science and religion in various ways. A commonly received idea is that, concomitant with the rise of literacy, what were once the Mysteries –forms of collective action involving ritual and initiation, shared through word and gesture– assumed a more outward form, no longer so secret, that became taken up in religions.¹⁰ Religion can be seen as exoteric mysteries. Esoteric groups practiced an inner process of initiation in contrast with the outer process of public rituals, entailing often their persecution thereby.

The divide between inner and outer is critically important in all cultures. It does not remain static but even *operates on itself*. This is a universal factor in cultural change. For example, in Bolshevik Russia, the Communists breaking away from the ruling establishment and taking power further split and began to persecute their own members. As a Palestinian studying in London told me, “The more people believe in the same thing, the more likely they are to kill each other.” Ordinary language itself discloses the underlying power of difference, which concerns difference of value and significance. There is a range of possibilities of

⁸ Donald G. David Jr, ‘Christianity and pagan libraries in the later Roman Empire’, *Library History*, vol. 2, issue 1 (1970), pp. 1-10.

⁹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experiences: A Study of Human Nature* (New York: The Modern Library Classics, 2000 [1902]).

¹⁰ Michael Wood, “The Sacred Way” (Ιερά Οδός), *YouTube* (1991). At: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4LOEZMGMJ8>.

difference, but many of them can be found echoed in the duality of the esoteric and the exoteric. Difference manifests in vocabulary through such pairs of words as rich and poor, male and female, hot and cold, true and false, et cetera. It also seems that one of the two is felt as signifying something that is lacking in the other. Obviously, for example, cold lacks heat; the false lacks truth. There is an asymmetry; equality is only possible with a third term. The asymmetry may not be weighted entirely in one direction but, for any society, there will be a dominant side of a given pair. This is still the case today concerning the two sexes, though now subject to challenge in an attempt to change the axis of asymmetry.

Asymmetry is played out in social behaviour. In many traditional societies there were special rituals for men from which women were excluded and, in general, this indicates a common trend towards ownership and control of knowledge. We might interpose here that this male exclusivity was ‘answered’ by the arising of women’s “secret language.”¹¹ To us, today, it might seem insane that people were persecuted and killed for making the Bible available in common languages instead of only in Latin. We have to imagine ourselves inside the frame of mind of authorities, who felt that making the words available to ordinary people was not just casting pearls before swine, but also would lead to the release of their *independent* intelligence that would disrupt the social order. The idea that ordinary people cannot handle the truth still prevails. This had its Victorian aspects in the nineteenth century, when the aristocracy would enjoy pornographic materials while seeking to ‘protect’ the common people, who were presumed not to have the moral strength to hold at bay the lusts which would be stimulated in them. Such attitudes are also to be found in the early twentieth century. For example, the English Islamic scholar Reynold A. Nicholson in translating Rumi’s twelfth-century mystical poem the *Mathnawi*, rendered the more bawdy passages into Latin so that they could not be read by uneducated people!¹²

The esoteric, then, is a theme threading through a variety of worlds within human culture. In general terms it is liberating but dangerous, reserved for the relatively few, to be seen as both profound and absurd. But this should not obscure the rich diversity of meaning it has gathered. What it means changes from across generations, and we will be exploring how it looks in the early years of the present century, when science and literature have changed the face of the mysterious.

Esoteric Writing

There are writings blatantly presented as esoteric, such as those of the alchemists or Gurdjieff’s *All and Everything*, but some ordinary writing has esoteric content for those who can see beyond the surface. The Bible is a case in point. It is supposed to be something accessible to everyone, yet it is often held to be understood only through an intelligent or inspired reading.

¹¹ Cathy Lyn Silber, ‘Nushu (Chinese Women’s Script): Literacy and Literature’, Doctor of Philosophy (Asian Languages and Cultures), University of Michigan (1995).

¹² Reynold A. Nicholson (trans.), *The Mathnawi of Jalālū’ddín Rúmí* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926). At: <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.151299/page/n3/mode/2up>.

This, as we shall see, seems to have been a feature of every piece of sacred literature produced through the ages.¹³

But we want to begin with a generic feature of written text which is implicit in a root meaning of the word intelligence as ‘reading between the lines’. This has been literally true. A blatant example is that of coded messages in Elizabethan times, in which secret information was written in invisible ink between the lines. Another kind of example is the writing of indications of pronunciation (particularly the vowels which are not usually written in Arabic and Semitic texts). In Arabic, for example, this is done mostly for religious texts and children’s books using the system called *tashkil*, in which marks are made above and below the letters. Pronunciation is an aspect of meaning. The use of *tashkil* and other systems reflect the tension between the said or evident and the unsaid or tacit. In theatre, we find the structure of text and subtext. The subtext is all-important but is not actually spoken: the audience is led to understand that it underlies and supplements what is said without being told what it is.¹⁴

In another kind of example, we find in Kabbalistic mysticism a tradition which says that the deeper meanings are not to be found in the letters of words – which are the basis for common ‘esoteric’ analyses – but in the spaces between them. It is said that from the spaces the angels can appear. This is an example of *second order* esotericism: the letters can be treated esoterically but the gaps between them indicate a higher order of esotericism.¹⁵ As is known from efforts to understand even ordinary documents, what is not said can mean more than what is said. Perhaps the idea that explicit texts spelling out esoteric knowledge exist might be regarded as an oxymoron.

In regard to reading, it is important to consider two alternative methods to the standard procedure of going from beginning to end. Firstly, there is the meaning of the text read in *reverse* order, backwards. Secondly, there is the reading of the text *as a whole*, not in sequence. The two are connected. Behind this is the generic understanding of *structure*. An esoteric reading begins with becoming aware of the significance of the structure of the text as more than just one thing after another. In the field of understanding, the structure of a message is also content. One might call it *second order information*: the way the elements are put together is at least as significant as the elements themselves. In a fully-fledged message there are, so to say, two channels, roughly corresponding to form and content. The capacity to see or read *form* can be seen as of a higher order than reading sequential content. Most of us will have had the experience of reading something where, though we understand every word, we know we are not getting what it means. Strangely, this is little commented on. It is generally presumed that, if one is capable of reading a text, that means one is ‘getting’ it. This is not true. The functionality of reading needs a holistic awareness if we are to *understand* what we read.

What we call form and content can separate, and the form become recognised in its own right, not simply as a container of content. We make the generalisation that all underlying forms can represent esoteric meaning. Structure relates to number, and it is plausible to say that

¹³ Patrick Laude, *The Esoteric in Religious and Spiritual Traditions: A Comparative Study* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2025).

¹⁴ Leo Rockas, ‘The Subtext of Drama’, *College Literature*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1976), pp. 42-48.

¹⁵ Elliot R. Wolfson, ‘Embodied Letter: Sufi and Kabbalistic Hermeneutics’, in *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations: From the Origins to the Present Day*, eds Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 837-852.

the divide of esoteric and exoteric often corresponds to the duality of number and words. This is the case with *gematria* where letters, words, and phrases can be *calculated* to show relationships of meaning. It is interesting that Gurdjieff introduces the idea of a *mesoteric* level between exoteric and esoteric, saying that in this level one can 'calculate' the truth but not *see* it directly.¹⁶ This is a useful idea because it pushes the idea of the truly esoteric to a higher and more mysterious level.

Most classical scholarship until recent times was in the hands of people trained in the humanities. Typically, such people were unversed in mathematics and largely unaware of the mathematical sophistication of ancient people. More recently some scholars have been able to uncover some of the previously unrecognised context of Plato's writings. One of the most outstanding examples of such readings has been the work of interpreting the writings of Plato and sacred Scriptures in terms of *harmonic theory* by Ernest McClain and others.¹⁷ To summarise, harmonic theory in a few sentences: the musical octave (or *diapason*) was taken as the primary model of Creation; using relatively simple ratios based on the first few primes 2, 3 and 5, the octave, made by a factor of two, can be variously divided into complex series of 'notes,' and each of these notes will be interpreted to correspond to an element in a cosmic or human drama. In Plato's writings these octaves sometimes represent cities – Atlantis, Athens, Sparta and Magnesia – and interpreted as different social orders. Such harmonic schemes could underpin the narratives of ancient people from the Sumerians to the Greeks, including India. Contrary to common assumptions, quite modern tunings were worked out at least 5000 years ago, which were eventually inherited by the Greeks.¹⁸

It was said that only people who understand geometry could enter Plato's Academy (where 'geometry' possibly referred to mathematical reasoning in general). We must emphasise the stark contrast between the narratives and dramas of ancient mystical stories, and the abstract systems of number based on harmonic theory that is claimed to be their inner or *generative* content. Actions like 'marriage', 'war', 'flood' and so on can then be seen as mathematical operations. (We must remember that mathematical operations were usually described in Plato and the Vedas in words, partly because there were no such things as equations). The idea that mathematical forms underpin narrative structures is not confined to harmonic theory. The *canonical formula* was derived by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss to explain how stories he found in South America mutated into other stories and is equivalent to a Klein group and some operations in quantum mechanics.¹⁹

I have mentioned geometry in connection with the mathematical underpinning of profound texts, and the significance of reversing the sequence of elements. The order of elements can assume alternative forms, from which stems a particular kind of esoteric/exoteric distinction. A striking example by Robin Heath concerns the order of the days of the week. The names of the days relate to bodies of the solar system – Sun, moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars,

¹⁶ Anthony Blake, 'The Fourth Way: A Hazardous Path (Part 2)', *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 28 (2018), pp. 101-156.

¹⁷ Ernest G. McClain, *The Myth of Invariance: The Origin of the Gods, Mathematics and Music from the Rig Veda to Plato* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1978).

¹⁸ Richard Heath, *The Harmonic Origins of the World: Sacred Number at the Source of Creation* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2018).

¹⁹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'The Structural Study of Myth', *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 68, no. 270 (1955), pp. 428-444.

Jupiter, Saturn – and their associated gods. The order of the days is a puzzle. If we arrange the bodies of the solar system according to their apparent speed to us, we have a circle of points. If we then inscribe a heptogram, we see that the inner lines of this figure follow the sequence of the days we know.

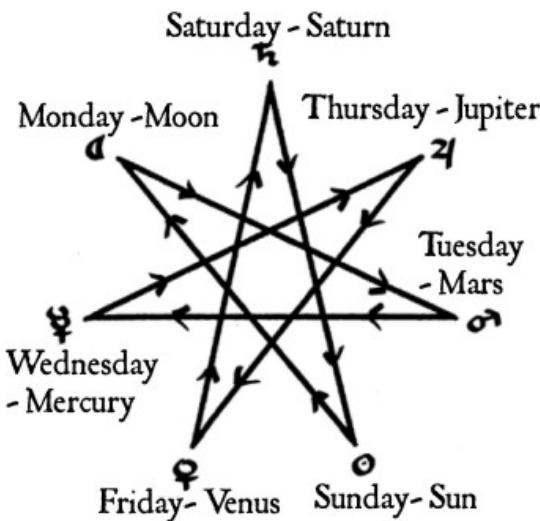


Figure 1. Heptogram combining Planetary Bodies and Days of Week

The significance of this example is that it illustrates the principle of difference between inner and outer sequence. In this particular case we do not know why such a technique was involved. It is a feature prominent in the diagram for which Gurdjieff became famous – the *enneagram* – where the contrast between inner and outer sequence is supremely important.²⁰ An interesting feature of the mathematical underpinning of significant texts is that it lends itself to a neutral or objective standpoint. The numbers operate impartially; *it is their expression in concrete terms* that makes for religion and ideology. This is an important aspect of the work on harmonic theory of Ernest McClain, and also on early astronomy as inspired by the seminal *Hamlet's Mill* by Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend.²¹ In the latter, the authors speak of abstract forms of thought as operators that were 'later' incorporated into mythological language. This gives a vivid image of a layer of discourse beneath the surface of apparent storytelling that can be described as *esoteric*.

Today, a learned man is usually one who understands what it is all about. Dante was certainly one. But was it so in remote ages? There is reason to doubt it. An esoteric doctrine, as defined by Aristotle, is one which is learned long before being understood. Much of the education of Chinese scholars was until very recently along those lines. Understanding remained something apart. It might never come at all, and at best would come when the learning was complete. There were other ways. One can give an extreme case from Rome. Athenaeus says that there was a much-applauded mime, Memphis by name, who in a brief dance was said

²⁰ Anthony Blake, *The Intelligent Enneagram* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1996). See also Carole M. Cusack, 'The Enneagram: G. I. Gurdjieff's Esoteric Symbol', *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2020), pp. 31-54.

²¹ Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill: An Essay on Myth and the Frame of Time* (Boston: Gambit, 1969).

to convey faultlessly the whole essence of the Pythagorean doctrine. It is not said that he understood it: he may have had an inkling, and the rest was his extraordinarily sharpened sense of expression. He had, so to speak, a morphological understanding that he could only express in action. His public understood surely no more than he: but they would be strict and unforgiving judges.²²

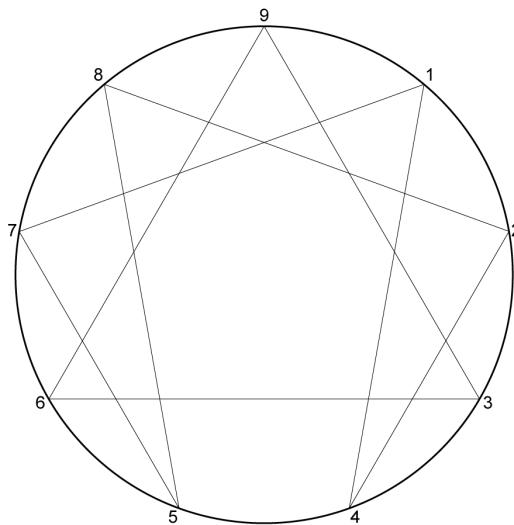


Figure 2. Enneagram. Image courtesy of Sebastiaan van Oyen.

Ring Composition

Yet there is not just one method involved in the inner structuring of ancient and spiritual texts. There were no textbooks about methodology, only a continuing culture of practice that might have involved dance and music as much as words. But recent discoveries or reinterpretations relating to ancient texts argue for a system of composition that appears to have been widely spread (just as the astronomical lore described in *Hamlet’s Mill* is claimed to have been global). Thus, writings from Sumer, the Bible, the Greeks, and Islam share the same literary foundation. In this foundation, the form of what is written is as important or more so than what is written.²³

It has been suggested that this ancient form of writing derived from an earlier period in which records were made in stone shaping the landscape using astronomical knowledge. The mathematics of this period was primitive but effective; the physical actions of building not divorced from calculation and reasoning. Such a view is rejected by mainstream archaeology which seems to be predicated on a model of linear progress that persists from the nineteenth century. There is a tendency to describe anything complex with no apparent immediate function as being ritualistic rather than scientific. Also, we are only just beginning to appreciate how much communication was possible in ancient times.

Both early astronomy and the composition of sacred texts appear to have been astonishingly widespread, as if there was a *global mind*. This itself is an esoteric idea. In simple terms we can define this idea as: there was communication between special groups of people

²² Lillian B. Lawler, ‘Portrait of a Dancer’, *The Classical Journal*, vol 41, no. 6 (1946), pp. 241-247.

²³ Margalit Finkelberg and Guy G. Stroumsa (eds), *Homer, the Bible, and Beyond: Literary and Religious Canons in the Ancient World* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003).

that was not dependent on the physical means we know of. All proposals of higher intelligence must involve such a hypothesis. It is a common sentiment that any higher reality must go beyond words, which links with the fact that we regard the minds of pre-literate people as unknown.

We may be enthralled with the extraordinary beauty and skill of ancient paintings and graphics such as those in Palaeolithic caves but are unable to read what intentions they represented.²⁴ We can postulate that something of this preliterate world was carried forward in the structures of literature that came later. The idea here is that structure can communicate something different from words and might therefore connect us with ancient humanity. An extreme form of this is that the *alphabet* encodes esoteric knowledge. It was invented only once and notwithstanding the special attention paid to the Hebrew letters, it is argued that *all* alphabetical languages carry the same embedded meanings.

For the moment, we will stay with the idea of communicating through words something which cannot be said in words. It seems that right at the beginning of literacy, the way was found of conveying subtle meanings that engaged the reader in an active way. This method derived from the perhaps spontaneous oral practice of *chiasmus*. It is widely accepted that in earlier times complex esoteric ideas were conveyed in ways that derived from widespread common practice or folklore, as Rene Guenon is quoted as saying by Martin Lings.²⁵ In the technique of *chiasmus*, to take an example, a sequence of five phrases takes the form ABCB'A', with the latter two being a reflection of the first two. The whole pivots on C, the middle item. This was usually a statement of the most important idea. Such a format was developed and made more sophisticated in what contemporary scholars call *ring composition*. Some of the texts explored as examples of ring composition range over 3,000 years, and include the *Iliad*, the books of the Old and New Testaments, and Rumi's *Mathnawi*.

The word *ring* refers to conceiving a narrative or explanation as arranged in a circle or ring. Doing this divides the text into two halves which are taken to mirror and reflect each other. Each half will contain much the same elements as the other but in reverse order. This means that the contents of the two sides parallel each other but with subtle differences. The circular arrangement is done mentally and shared between writer and reader. There are two critical points in the arrangement. At the top we have the meeting of beginning and end. Scholars have called this the *latch*, meaning it ties the two together. In a simplistic story, there at the latch is where we would find the moral of the tale. Opposite the latch, at the bottom of the imagined circle, is a point or element that is called the *turn*. This is where the sequence of the first side reverses into the sequence of the second side. It has also been used to suggest, depending on the nature of composition, a change of fortune or an inversion of perspective.²⁶

In ring composition we move from one-dimensional to two-dimensional thinking. It is assumed that readers have the capacity to visualise or hold within them the totality of the text. This is not so much a *picture* but a *structure*. In a study of the first book of the *Mathnawi*, *Rumi's Mystical Design*, Simon Weightman and Seyed Ghahreman Safavi suggest that the first half of the narrative represents the perspective of man while the second represents the

²⁴ Bruno David, *Cave Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017).

²⁵ Martin Lings, *Symbol & Archetype: A Study of the Meaning of Existence* (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1991).

²⁶ Mary Douglas, *Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

perspective of God. This invokes the sense that *between* them lies the path of the *seeker*.²⁷ There are two versions of the same stories. The visualised arrangement opens a space for the reader to enter. There are six basic stories in this example, and an archetypal form of the ring system reflects the ubiquity of the twelvefold principle, yet there is no rigid formula for the number of elements or their connections.

Also, when we consider the connections across the imagined circle, these may not be confined to simple parallelisms. A supreme example of this was discovered in studies of the *Gathas* attributed to Zoroaster. Linguistics and ancient Iranian languages scholar Martin Schwartz, from University of California, Berkeley argues that, in the ‘crossovers’ he identifies, the prophet expressed the salient points of the new theology he was bringing to Persia.²⁸

In another example studied by Simon Weightmann, the *Madhumalati*, an Indian Sufi Romance, the virtual vertical line through the ring depicts the basic structure of yoga. All such examples illustrate a contrast between inner and outer.²⁹ They can be taken quite literally or metaphorically and equated with the distinction between esoteric and exoteric. It may also explain how there can be esoteric writings hidden inside a visible text. To read the inner story requires memory, awareness, and effort, and there is the idea that it is in this that the value of the esoteric resides. In a deeper sense the reader has to *become* the text, which means to bring it into *being*.

The critical element is holding together different kinds of meaning at one and the same time. This applies when we are reading a text with both literal and metaphorical meaning, where what is important is not to choose the one over the other, but to learn how to meld them. As William Blake put it: “And twofold always, may God us keep/From single vision and Newton’s sleep.”³⁰

Esoteric Movements

We have spoken about ‘number’ as lying behind ‘words’ in writing. This can be taken further in considering the possibility that there are ‘sacred dances’ which contain esoteric knowledge (or experience, the distinction not being very clear in this domain). This was the overt claim of Gurdjieff who said he would like best to be known as a “rather good teacher of temple dances.”³¹ He claimed that in ancient times sacred dances were the equivalent of our books and emphasised that they contained *knowledge* and were more than emotional experiences.

His followers have remarked that Gurdjieff’s own ‘sacred dances’ incorporated a non-verbal language. One hits a paradox in seeking to understand in any particular case what a dance is ‘saying’ since this requires translation into words. We should note that common sign-

²⁷ Seyed Ghahreman Safavi and Simon Weightman, *Rumi’s Mystical Design: Reading the Mathnawi, Book One* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009).

²⁸ Martin Schwartz, ‘Revelations, Theology, and Poetics in the Gathas’, *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, New Series, vol. 14 (2000), pp. 1-18.

²⁹ Aditya Behl and Simon Weightman (trans.) (with Shyam Manohar Pandey), *Madhumalati: An Indian Sufi Romance* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2000).

³⁰ Keith Davies, ‘The Single Vision and Newton’s Sleep’, 19 July (2023). At: <https://blakesociety.org/single-vision-and-newton-sleep/>.

³¹ Mark Sedgwick, ‘Sufis as Mythic Bearers of Esoteric Tradition’. In *Constructing Tradition: Means and Myths of Transmission in Western Esotericism*, ed. A. B. Kilcher (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), pp. 413-426.

language is not a truly non-verbal language because it attempts to imitate or code words of spoken language such as English. As Oliver Sachs has remarked, we can hardly imagine what might be communicated between deaf-mute people amongst themselves when they are not required to use standard languages and can fully use the three-dimensionality of their hands and bodies as well as temporal sequence.³²

The idea that there might be a language that not only does not use words or signs but is *not even symbolic* as can be the case with images is a startling one, put forward by John Godolphin Bennett in his magnum opus *The Dramatic Universe* (Volume 1). Bennett was basing his concepts on experience of Gurdjieff's Movements but also claimed that there was a living tradition stretching back thousands of years that preserved ancient knowledge; exemplified in Sufism by Ahmad Yasavi (1093–1166). The common academic approach has no conception of a conscious language of dance, tending to speak in loose terms of 'ritual' and 'ecstatic trance' and so on. In his book *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* Bennett wrote:

one true function of dance and mime is to express by gesture and to communicate without the use of conceptual speech. Schools have arisen in many parts of the world that claim to put into operation the principle of significant gesture: but, according to Gurdjieff, this was achieved in South-West and Central Asia in the remote past and much has been preserved up to our time in monasteries and temples — particularly those of various Sufi orders.³³

Though we question the loose use of the term 'ritual' it is useful to understand that participation in a ritual, such as those of the early church, can be an *enactment* of past events, including of course mythic and religious events. By going through the movements of the ritual people can *participate* in these events. As Gurdjieff put it, they are a form of remembrance. He often said that 'knowledge of past events' could be contained in and transmitted through dances. The Cambridge scholar Francis Cornford has argued that the metaphysical ideas of the ancients were first embodied in rituals rather than texts.³⁴ It is possible that the operation of what are called *mirror neurons* has a bearing on the way that ritual has an effect on people. When we see someone expressing a feeling for example, our brains create the action in us, and it is this that enables us to feel what the person is going through. To extend the idea: going through a series of actions could evoke a particular experience. This would have to be learned, of course.

What is discussed here has an important history in the twentieth century. An idea as radical as that of the unconscious was to treat the body as of equivalent status and intelligence to the mind. This particularly flourished in the realm of dance and theatre and involved, of course, the primary move of accepting women on a par with men. One of the key figures in the promotion of the body was Jerzy Grotowski (1933–1999) whose revolutionary experiments in theatre resonated with Gurdjieff's movements. Though independent, Grotowski publicly acknowledged the importance of Gurdjieff to him.³⁵ Bennett went further, connecting gesture to *will*. It is in will that there can be a commonality of both uniqueness and universality. Thus,

³² Oliver Sacks, *Seeing Voices: A Journey into the World of the Deaf* (London: Picador, 2012).

³³ John Godolphin Bennett, *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

³⁴ Francis Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy: A Study in the Origins of Western Speculation* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004).

³⁵ Catharine Christof, *Rethinking Religion in the Theatre of Grotowski* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

in the execution of the movements of Gurdjieff there is a fusion of the individual 'discovering herself' and the manifestation of 'universal laws'. The one without the other is not possible.

The uniqueness of gestures corresponds to the uniqueness of understanding. Understanding of one situation cannot be transferred to another. Understanding is always new because it is always an act of will, and the language of understanding must itself be an act of understanding. In the language of gesture, no word, no act, ever means the same thing twice. It is the language of the whole man, and it can be used only by a man who is himself a fully structural whole. The 'gestures' of ordinary people are no more than the automatism of their functions. The meaning of such gestures does not belong to those who make them, but to the universal processes into which they are merged. We must not be misled by the fact that a gesture is sometimes a sign or a symbol.³⁶

In our brief survey of the esoteric and how we might understand it today, we have touched on language and could not leave the topic without trying to address the special case of gesture and its meaning as the *language of the will*.

Understanding Stories

The original life of thought, born of the same seeds as the Vedas, worked its way in darkness, sent its roots and tendrils through the deep, until the living plant emerged in the light under different skies. Half a world away it became possible to rediscover a similar voyage of the mind which contained not a single linguistic clue that a philologist could endorse. From the very faintest of hints, the ladder of thought leading back to proto-Pythagorean imagery was revealed to the preternaturally perceptive minds of Kircher and Dupuis. The inevitable process became discernible, going from astronomical phenomena to what might be beyond them. Finally, perhaps, as Proclus suggested, the sequence leads from words to numbers, and then even beyond the idea of number to a world where number itself has ceased to exist and there are only thought forms thinking themselves. With this progression, the ascensional power of the archaic mind, supported by numbers, has re-established the link between two separate worlds.³⁷

The nature of this unknown world of abstract form can also be suggested by way of musical symbols, as was attempted earlier. Johann Sebastian Bach's *Art of Fugue* (1742-1749) was never completed. Its existing symmetries serve only as a hint of what it might have been, and the work is not even as Bach left it. The engraved plates were lost and partly destroyed. Then, collected once more, they were placed in approximate order. Even so, looking at the creation as it now is, one is compelled to believe that there was a time when the plan as a whole lived in Bach's mind.³⁸

We have sketched a perspective on the esoteric in writing that shows the role played by structure in various guises. The elements used in a story or explanation can be configured in various ways, rendering inner meanings accessible only to those with sufficient 'education.' Such treatments require the reader to operate in imaginal space. For example, the understanding

³⁶ John Godolphin Bennett, *The Dramatic Universe*, Volume 1 (CreateSpace, 2018 [1956]), p. 91.

³⁷ De Santillana and von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill*, p. 346.

³⁸ Loïc Sylvestre and Marco Costa, 'The Mathematical Architecture of Bach's *The Art of Fugue*', *Il Saggiatore Musicale*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2010), opp. 175-195.

of harmonic theory in sacred texts – according to Ernest McClain – seems to have required a visualisation of a ‘magic mountain’ showing a structure of multiples of the prime numbers three and five. The structural content of messages employs a kind of mathematics.

In ring composition the critical meaning is *in the middle* and the form of a message is part of the message. The latter reminds us of the pioneering insights of Marshall McLuhan and his famous saying, ‘the medium is the message.’ However, for a reader lacking in analytic or holistic awareness, and ignorant of compositional method, the effect of such underlying structure will remain in what Gurdjieff called the subconsciousness. He even claimed, in the first chapter of his book *Beelzebub’s Tales*, that the book was designed to operate in the reader’s subconsciousness and would lead to his awakening.³⁹

A similar claim was made by Idries Shah concerning the use of Middle Eastern teaching stories, something he himself developed. He said these were not to convey a moral or provide rational explanation, but were to enable the reader to reflect on his own reactions to the story as material for understanding. He explained one of his stories – the Legend of *Du’ nun* – in which tradition had it that a pointing statue indicated where ancient treasure of the Egyptians was buried. The Sufi discovered that this meant he had to dig where the *shadow* of the pointing finger fell at a certain time. This is interpreted as an indication that the student should ‘dig where the ground is moist,’ meaning he should investigate deeper into what is evoked by such stories *in himself*.⁴⁰

In his Second Series, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, in the chapter on Father Giovanni, Gurdjieff claims that faith is a matter of understanding, and that understanding requires *real knowledge of events in the past*. His account of historical events in the First Series is mythological rather than factual. It includes stories of interventions by messengers from above, or the supernatural, and also the destruction of their work. Gurdjieff portrays an ongoing struggle to awaken humanity from being in thrall to defects in its nature that arose long in the past. In doing so, he involves the reader personally, and evokes a sense of a concerned higher intelligence that is not omnipotent but compassionate and inventive. His writings express the possibility of a higher logic and mode of action than is usually the case. How realistic are they?

The most significant and problematic feature of any ‘real history’ is the question of *human freedom*. Are some people more free than others? Gurdjieff’s reference to true knowledge of past events implies a vision of the world in which there are superior people who know how to influence the future in unusual ways. The conscious shaping of events has been called *maya yoga* and related to meta-theatre in which, we might say, the artifice of the stage is transposed into real life. This idea was portrayed in John Fowles’ novel *The Magus* (1968).⁴¹ It also appears in a film called *The Silent Flute* (1978) in which there is a scene where a spiritual master intervenes in events in ways that scandalise his erstwhile pupil but are shown to derive from the master’s higher perception of events in the future. The story is taken from the Qur’an in the surah *Al-Kalif:60*, where the master is the mysterious figure *Khidr* and his pupil, Moses.

An evident feature of such higher actions is that they are portrayed as stemming from someone who is close to God. In the exoteric world the equivalent is the performing of miracles.

³⁹ Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson*, Chapter 1, ‘The Arousing of Thought’.

⁴⁰ Idries Shah, *The Hundred Tales of Wisdom* (London: ISF Publishing, 2018).

⁴¹ John Fowles, *The Magus* (London: Pan Macmillan 1973 [1968]).

A person is sanctified as a saint if he or she has wrought miracles, typically of healing. The cases of higher action, in contrast, demonstrate meta-theatre: there is an intervention in real events which not only changes the future, but expresses a higher meaning that entails non-linear time. If there has been such a higher order of events, then a seeker can hope to *participate* in them. This is possible because such events transcend space and time. True consciousness connects events of different times. But the connection is not passive and demands something of the individual. Such an esoteric idea is found in the writings of Gurdjieff's pupils and in the science-fiction world of Philip K. Dick. Dick believed he was living not in twentieth century America, but in the time of the apostles (as depicted in the Acts of the Apostles) in Rome.⁴² Bennett, a pupil of Gurdjieff, many times wrote about the time of Christ, and sometimes *just as if he were there*.

Gurdjieff identified some religious rituals as acts of remembrance, with the implication that they could be made into a means of actually taking part in the events they express. This was the original sense people had of the Christian liturgy, and even today there remains a feeling of taking part in an enactment of the Last Supper which prefigured the crucifixion. In *Beelzebub's Tales*, Gurdjieff gives an esoteric interpretation of this event, vitally important for the Christian religion. He is said to have emphasised the importance of this interpretation in conversation with his pupils, particularly Bennett, whom he instructed to spread this 'gospel.'

The explanation incorporates something that is blatantly esoteric, namely: a man can have bodies finer than his physical one. In Gurdjieff's teaching, operations concerning the finer bodies matter very much more than those of the physical body? Clearly such operations will not be conditioned by time and space as are those of the organism.⁴³ The 'body of Christ' referred to in the mass, and identified with the holy wafer eaten by the congregation, is not His physical flesh and blood, but the very substance of His inner body. Gurdjieff goes on to say that it is through this body and its substance that Christ made a connection with the disciples that was maintained after his physical death. The making of this connection required a special process, and the completion of this process was being threatened by forces in the environment at that moment. The authorities needed to be distracted.

The portrayal is dramatic and, possibly, the main inspiration for the title of Bennett's own magnum opus *The Dramatic Universe*. It is theatrical. It expresses the miraculous intersection of inner and outer actions, and, as we shall see, highlights the significance of *playing a role*, which became an essential part of Gurdjieff-inspired work. Incidentally, esoteric material such as this example, portraying the time of Christ, shatters the boundary between fact and fiction: what is true is more than what is actual.

The Gospel of Judas

In orthodox thinking, Judas is regarded as a traitor, a wretch who takes money to betray Jesus and then hangs himself in despair. In Gurdjieff's vision, *though he did these things*, Judas was

⁴² Arthur Bradley, 'Philip K. Dick's Half-Lives', *Political Theology Network*, 8 November (2024). At: <https://politicaltheology.com/symposium/philip-k-dicks-half-lives/>.

⁴³ J.G. Bennett, *Gurdjieff: A Very Great Enigma* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1973), pp. 38-39.

the disciple most beloved by Jesus and given a special task only he was capable of understanding and carrying out. This was to involve the authorities in a distracting sequence of events, allowing Jesus to complete the process of connecting his inner body with those of his disciples. Bennett, in his further explanations of this version of events, went so far as to identify the ‘lamb who takes away the sins of the world’ with Judas and not with Christ. Bennett saw the vilification heaped upon Judas as part of his supreme sacrifice: he took away the contamination of human motives from the action of the Last Supper, leaving it free from sin.⁴⁴

The Gurdjieff/Bennett story of the Last Supper is evidently an example of esotericism. It gives a totally different account than prevails in the church, and describes an action made by highly conscious people in achieving a higher purpose. Years ago, I turned to the Gospel of John and was astonished to see that, though I was reading the same words as before, they had a totally different meaning. It gave me a shock that has never quite left me. The shock was mostly the realisation that for about 2000 years most people have regarded Judas as a miserable traitor, even though it then seemed to me quite obvious that he was in intimate communication with Jesus. Judas *did* act out a betrayal of Jesus, but in doing so he was *playing a role* asked of him by the very son of God. Other people have created different interpretations of Judas, a striking example being that of Jorge Luis Borges’s *Three Versions of Judas*.⁴⁵ As Gurdjieff’s version can lead us to challenge the orthodox view, so Borges’ essay can lead us to challenge Gurdjieff’s. The esoteric may not be consistent or monolithic in any obvious way, but diverse and self-contradictory.⁴⁶

Orthodox or commonly accepted interpretations are one-dimensional with a naive distinction of the good and bad. It is striking how mystics in Islam such as the Sufi Hallaj regarded *Iblis* or Satan as a *help* in transformation, something strongly echoed in Gurdjieff (as in his well-known saying ‘trust devil’). Al-Hallaj sees both Iblis and Muhammad as pivotal characters in the unfolding of the God’s divine plan. They are both faithful instruments whose obedience is unswerving, despite the ordeals each must suffer.

To support the view that esoteric writing centres on an alternative view of past events, we can cite Gurdjieff’s elusive concept of *legominism*. A legominism, as he defined it, is a message particularly about past events intentionally transmitted to future generations by a means that enables it to survive through physical and social turbulence, but which can only be deciphered or read or *understood* by what he called ‘initiates’.⁴⁷ Guenon speaks of much the same thing:

When a traditional form is on the point of becoming extinct, its last representatives may well deliberately entrust to this aforesaid collective memory the things that would otherwise be lost beyond recall; that is in point of fact the sole means of saving what can in a certain measure be saved. At the same time, the lack of understanding that is one of the natural characteristics of the masses is a sure enough guarantee that what

⁴⁴ Joseph Azize, *John G. Bennett: Witness to Death and Resurrection* (Rhinebeck, NY: Red Elixir, 2024), *passim*.

⁴⁵ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Three Versions of Judas’, *Ficciones* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993 [1944]).

⁴⁶ Anthony Blake, ‘Esoteric Writing’, *The Proceedings of the 18th International Humanities Conference, All & Everything 2013* (All & Everything, 2013), pp. 69-106.

⁴⁷ Anthony Blake, ‘Gurdjieff and the Legomonism of “Objective Reason”,’ in Carole M. Cusack and Alex Norman (eds), *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), pp. 237-270.

was esoteric will be none the less undivulged, remaining merely as a sort of witness of the past for such as, in later times, shall be capable of understanding it.⁴⁸

An additional component in the ways ancient wisdom might be transmitted to future generations is called, in Theosophy, the akashic records, and, in Gurdjieff’s *Beelzebub’s Tales, korkaptlnian* thought tapes. These ‘memories’ are said to be carried in the atmosphere or air of the planet; which means they belong to the second or ‘subtle world’. They rather correspond to the saying in the Gospels to lay up one’s treasures in heaven where they will not be corrupted:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. *Matthew 6:19-21*

There is a significant step from simply ‘storing up treasures’ to intentionally communicating to future generations. Usually, we do not think of people in the past as wanting to communicate with us in their future. We regard the past as fixed and done with. Yet, in an esoteric view, ancient people *can contact us*. In the language of John Bennett, wise or enlightened people live in ‘hyparchic’ time where they are able to be more free than us. Hyparchic time is similar to what Maurice Nicoll called “living time.”⁴⁹

The ancient human and the modern can make contact through a kind of ‘bridge’ or device. In Tibetan Buddhism this is called a *tetra* or ‘treasure’ which can store a meaning for hundreds of years until discovered by someone capable of recognising and reading it and *making use of it*. The transmission we are considering here is a twofold one: there is both some material artefact that endures over time (including a text and its copies) and also a *direct* contact. Perhaps the example of light can help us understand this. On the one hand, light travels at a specific velocity and we measure distances in units such as light years; however, in relativity theory where space and time are treated as one space-time, the *interval* between an emission and absorption of light can be *zero*. We might say that besides what is speculated to be ‘remote viewing’ there could be a ‘non-temporal remembering’. Such a possibility is enfolded in Bennett’s idea of a *greater present moment* such that there could be a ‘now’ that to us lasts for a thousand years.

Our picture of transmission and communication through time can be enriched by the idea that there are ‘underground streams’ flowing through humanity largely unperceived in self-conscious external culture. This was depicted in Doris Lessing’s novel *The Four-Gated City* (1969) but most clearly expressed in Denis Saurat’s *Gods of the People*.⁵⁰ Saurat, an admirer of Gurdjieff’s *Beelzebub’s Tales to his Grandson*, claimed there was a coherent metaphysical stream quite different to what appeared in any theology or philosophy, but which surfaced like little springs in the works of poets such as William Blake. This has parallels in the history of the emergence of gnostic texts (and even in archaeology when unexpected new finds can revolutionise our ideas of the past).

⁴⁸ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, Chapter 6.

⁴⁹ Maurice Nicoll, *Living Time: And the Integration of the Life* (Utrecht: Eureka Editions, 2020 [1952]).

⁵⁰ Denis Saurat, *Gods of the People* (London: John Westhouse, 1947).

The recent discovery of a *Gospel of Judas* was astonishing. Like many other alternative Gospels, it portrays Jesus in deep conversation with his disciples, but in this one Judas appears as the wisest and most compassionate of them all. The appearance of this gospel can be taken as miraculous in the sense that it was so highly unlikely as to have been near impossible for it to survive. Gurdjieff's and Bennett's writings and the *Gospel of Judas* itself are stories, pieces of writing. This fact points not only to special, imagined, or alternative events, but also to writing itself. There is a further layer to uncover to our topic of the esoteric; it is possible that esoteric ideas in writing can elicit an awareness of the esoteric that is implicated in all writing. *It is writing itself that is esoteric*. According to George Steiner, in his book *Real Presences*, there can be an esoteric reading of all literature in the sense of understanding them as revelation. The Italian polymath Roberto Calasso claims, in his *Literature and the Gods*, that literature has moved from stories *about* the gods and higher things to incorporating them in the very body of writing itself.⁵¹

According to Alberto Manguel in the course of reading over 4,000 years the hero has been *the reader*. An important development in the twentieth century, particularly with the rise of experimental writing and search for new forms and media of expression, has been the realisation of *new ways of reading*.⁵² A startling implication of Gurdjieff's idea of legomonism – at least in our view – that he himself never articulated because of his basis being largely in nineteenth century thought (linear and authoritarian) but much more easily apparent to us now in the twenty-first century is that esoteric reading *must be a two-way process*, even a *synergy*. Let us put it thus: the ancient and the modern person *meet*.⁵³ It is the meeting that counts, an act of transcending linear time. From regarding the esoteric as *the* inner truth of the exoteric we can move to seeing it as *essentially multivalued*. And the esoteric and the exoteric as *complementary*. This comes into focus when we consider science.

True Science

Natural science is still widely portrayed in terms of a steady advance of a conservative body of institutions and operations. However, studies in the history of science paint a different picture, in which hazard has a significant role and uncertainty and controversy play an essential role. In my own studies in this field, I postulated the existence of alternative science as almost a necessity. Alternative science offers a different perspective and set of values to orthodoxy of the mainstream. So much so that it is often rejected as being not part of science at all. Alternative science may look backwards or forwards. Theosophy claimed to have clairvoyant vision of atoms which might appear to be looking forward in terms of a direct perception, but this was in fact retrogressive following the idea of vortices as put forward by Rene Descartes. Just at that time, a mathematical physics was developing which did not require pictures. However, controversy concerning the actual existence of atoms was rife at the time, and many

⁵¹ Roberto Calasso, *Literature and the Gods* (London: Vintage, 2002).

⁵² Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996).

⁵³ Charles Marshall Stang, “‘Knowledge Is Said to Be in a Place’: Teaching an Ancient Esoteric Text Through Experimental, Embodied Reading Practices”, in *Embodied Pedagogies in the Study of Religion*, ed. Sravana Borkataky-Varma and Sarabih Levy-Brightman (London and New York: Routledge, 2025).

physicists refused to believe atoms were real until the beginning of the twentieth century brought empirical evidence and opened physics to the atomic and subatomic world.

A different kind of example is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's theory of colours, which he consciously proposed to contrast with Isaac Newton's *Optics*. Today we can accommodate such a theory as phenomenological and holistic, much as Henri Bortoft did in *Goethe's Way of Science*.⁵⁴ It is important to remember that Goethe claimed he could see things directly that others could not, as described in his account of the conversation he had with the playwright Friedrich Schiller, *A Fortunate Encounter*. In spite of their differences, they became life-long friends. This claim lived on in the work of Rudolf Steiner (who was originally connected with the Theosophical movement) in which he constantly espoused *clairvoyant vision*. The contrast between the mainstream scientist who operates in terms of measurements and experiments that he can interpret mathematically, and the holistic or spiritual alternative scientist who can claim a personal organic perception of things hidden to most people is stark. It is an open question whether they can ever come to agreement.⁵⁵ Interestingly enough, the literature on scientific research includes many anecdotes of scientists *imagining* the inner workings of nature in a rich way that enabled them to 'feel' how they were. (I had conversations with an industrial scientist who told me this is how he solved one of his first problems). This was crucial in the work of Bragg on the structure of crystals. Needless to say, such experiences are never described in the *academic papers* they published.

The question of what precisely is the nature of sensory, and extrasensory, perception is controversial and far-reaching. Reason and imagination 'play' between them. We should mention here the extreme case of Wolfgang Pauli, a leading quantum physicist of the twentieth century, who worked with Carl Gustav Jung on the interpretation of his *dreams* as providing access not only to his personal transformation but also stimulating his work on physics and the nature of physical reality. Dreams offer an alternative way of processing our experience and knowledge to rational, conscious thought.⁵⁶

As far as what we take to be science is concerned, it is arguably the case that it must have a global character, and any tendency to speak except in an historical or anthropological sense of an 'Islamic' or 'African' science is regrettable. This point of view is supported by the cosmological principle in physics itself which says that the laws of physics must be the same everywhere. Yet, the scientific revolution began in Europe and may still carry a conditioning from its origins. Many people feel that Asian culture, in particular, has much to offer for the future of science. And we should not forget the possibility that science might change as more women find their way into it.

It is in its universality that science vies with the esoteric tradition. Science achieves this through manifest processes of publication and communication while the esoteric claims something like a telepathic synchronisation, as indicated by René Guénon in *Lord of the World*:

⁵⁴ Henri Bortoft, *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way Toward a Science of Conscious Participation in Nature* (London: Lindisfarne Books, 1996).

⁵⁵ Egil Asprem, 'Dis/unity of Knowledge: Models for the Study of Modern Esotericism and Science', *Numen*, vol. 62, nos 5-6 (2015), pp. 538-567.

⁵⁶ Carl Gustav Jung and Wolfgang Pauli, *Atom and Archetype: The Pauli/Jung Letters 1932-1958* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

“The Lord of the World,” said a Lama to Ossendowski, “is in touch with the thoughts of all those who direct the destiny of mankind ... He knows their intentions and their ideas. If these are pleasing to God, the Lord of the World favours them with his invisible aid. But if they are displeasing to God, he puts a check on their activities. This power is given to through the mysterious science of ‘Om’, the word we use to begin our prayers.”⁵⁷

Interestingly enough, John Bennett who embraced both mysticism and science, suggested that ‘higher intelligence’ regulated human discoveries, sometimes inhibiting some for a period while increasing the resonance of others. We should add here that the traditional esoteric view includes the idea of a *supreme centre* and a *supreme authority*, which science does not.

Religion and metaphysical ideas have played a significant role in the history of science but have never led - directly - to any discovery. For example, much the same results concerning the nature of energy were achieved in the nineteenth century by British scientists who appealed to theistic ideas and French scientists who rejected such ideas entirely. But we should remember that both Kepler and Newton for example were steeped in religious and metaphysical beliefs which they regarded as integral to their scientific discoveries. When something new is emerging, there is uncertainty.

The old paradigm, to use physicist Thomas Kuhn’s theory of scientific revolutions, is broken and a new one yet to crystallise. This picture, in which there is a radical transition from one time-condition to another, parallels what we can find in spiritual descriptions of ‘ages’ or ‘epochs’.⁵⁸ *Hamlet’s Mill* is largely predicated on the idea that ‘floods’ were cosmic events, changing the mindset of humanity.

It is intriguing that the beginning of the twentieth century saw not only breakthroughs in mathematical physics (relativity theory and then quantum mechanics), but also the emergence of the phenomenological method ensuing from Husserl. In the latter, *epoché* (or ‘bracketing’) mirrors the way experiments are set up to neutralise other influences than those sought after. There are physical apparatuses that are used in such a way such as the anechoic chamber which eliminates all sound, or the Faraday cage which cancels out all electromagnetic radiation inside it. We see such apparatuses as corresponding to techniques of meditation.

Phenomenology seems to offer a genuine way of ‘alternative science’ and arguably represents the ‘right brain’ side of our intelligence in contrast with the ‘left brain’ approach that restricts itself to the “external, objective world.”⁵⁹ Wolfgang Pauli made a point of arguing that physical science ‘went wrong’ in the transition to Newtonian physics in the seventeenth century by rejecting alchemy. He expressed this in the language of the qualitative meanings of number by saying that science adhered to the triad and rejected the tetrad then associated with alchemy (much as Jung criticised the Christian Trinity and advocated the feminine fourth). Pauli, with Jung, were determined that physics and psychology should be brought together in a new understanding of reality. While many thinkers grappled with the fundamentals of

⁵⁷ René Guénon, *The Lord of the World*, with a biographical note by Pietro Nutrizio (DuVersity Publications, 2018 [1958]), p. 19.

⁵⁸ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996 [1962]).

⁵⁹ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven. CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

quantum theory Jung would find precedents for his dreams in alchemy and texts hundreds of years old. The impression given is that what Jung referred to as the 'collective unconscious' was his take on what we have from time to time in this essay simply called *higher intelligence*.

There is now a fairly widespread belief that science as it is generally known is *incomplete*. We have touched upon this a number of times already. Sometimes this is described as 'being forgotten'. It is certainly a theme of Gurdjieff's *Beelzebub's Tales* and it is likely that his emphasis on 'self-remembering' was intended to link our personal strivings with escaping a general amnesia. Search for 'lost knowledge' expanded in the twentieth century as more and more, scholars and scientists lost some of their tendency to dismiss, as Gurdjieff put it, 'what ancient savages thought'. It was not only science that came to be seen in this light, as missing something that was known 'long ago' but, religion also, as is evidenced in the current fascination with *shamanism*. It is interesting to consider an example of 'alternative science' which has a bearing on the source of esoteric information. René Guénon remarked of "things that have real symbolic power 'their origin is not even human.'" And our example comes from the evolutionary theory of Alfred Russel Wallace: he contended that human evolution was a special divine act, something utterly rejected by mainstream biology.⁶⁰

Articulation of Meaning Space

The esoteric is often seen from the perspective of the exoteric as part of the 'lunatic fringe.' If we put aside the value judgment, then the esoteric appears just as an alternative, usually in regard to being a minority view antithetical to the majority view. If we visualise some plot of degrees of rationality (in the sense of conforming to reality) against population in the form of a standard bell curve we would have a symmetrical picture. An implication is that an 'average person' is liable to treat the above average side of the curve as being much the same as the below average side: imbecility will mirror genius. This is because the two dimensions of the graph give two readings, one quantitative based on numbers of people and the other qualitative, based on consciousness of level. Real life will be somewhat of a mixture.⁶¹

If we take a more detached and global view, then we might see the exoteric and the esoteric as *complementarities*. This could develop further. (It is fairly obvious that various kinds of tetrad can be formed in which the quantitative and qualitative distinctions intersect). We are led to the idea of a *meaning space* in which oppositions and linkages create a 'struggle' for existence. Various features might emerge from such a 'mindscape.' There can be a multitude of complementariness, such as the exclusive and the inclusive. For example, in relation to science, the philosopher Paul Feyerabend argued in his classic book *Against Method* that there was no such thing as a defining scientific method. With diversity as the rule, he said science should include things that most people would exclude. Other philosophers such as Karl Popper think it necessary to have a clear distinction dividing science from other kinds of thought (which he provided by the principle of *falsification*). If something is *interesting* it is totally unlikely to be considered in only one way. As we said earlier, the heart of science itself could

⁶⁰ Martin Fichman, 'Science in Theistic Contexts: A Case Study of Alfred Russel Wallace on Human Evolution', *Osiris*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2001), pp. 227-250.

⁶¹ Michael Buchowski, 'Anti-Anti-Rationalism: Anthropology and the Rationality of Human Acts', in *Rationality and the Study of Religion*, ed. Jeppe Sinding Jensen and Luther Martin (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

be thought of as polemical; though this is *science in the making*, rather than what Kuhn calls ‘normal science’.

The partition of a meaning space at times of intellectual change has been described by sociologist Randall Collins in *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* as ‘the law of small numbers’ because, typically, the number of distinct elements is found to be between three and six.⁶² Thus, a simple opposition between exoteric and esoteric would be most unlikely. Collins says that any such duality would inevitably evoke a third version of their combination. The structure of intellectual life is governed by a principle: the number of active schools of thought which reproduce themselves for more than one or two generations in an argumentative community is on the order of three to six. There is a strong lower limit; creativity can scarcely occur without rival positions, and almost always in any creative period there are at least three. There is also an upper limit; whenever there are more than about four to six distinct positions, most of them are not propagated across subsequent generations.

Centuries after a period of creativity and transition, the multiplicity fades. For example, we now think of the fifth century BC in India as mostly significant for the teachings of Buddha. But, at the time, there were alternative world views: that of Mahavira Jain, that of Makkhali Gosala and the *Ajivikatas*, the existing Brahmanic schools, and *Lokayata* or materialists. Collins’ picture keeps close to the complexity. However, it is reasonable to see a kind of pattern clustering around a fourfold pattern of types of world view that balances both as conflict and harmony. Such a pattern is recognised in many fields but is of a different nature from that of ‘law’ in science. Thus, we encounter the kind of complementarity as between mathematical physics and phenomenology.

Elements of Pythagoras and alchemy merge in a fourfold structure of understanding wherein ‘the fourth’ is distinguished with a special meaning that can be regarded as ‘esoteric.’ This was pointed out by the eccentric thinker known as Charlotte Bach.⁶³ Using alchemical reasoning to articulate a theory of evolution, she identified the arising of what she called ‘the recalcitrant fourth’ with making a creative step. The language she used was based on sexuality and she pointed out that this fourth element would be regarded as *perverse* in the eyes of the status quo. Typically, this was identified with what was feminine, unconscious, and time-based in contrast with what was masculine, conscious, and space-based. In more neutral terms we can picture this element as a *contradiction of contradictions* (actually, in parallel with the Pythagorean concept of justice as a ‘number squared’).

In other treatments of the fourfold scheme or *tetrad* (there will also be some expression of Collins’ law of small numbers in the field of such treatments) there is an abstract description that has hyperlogical form, as in the semiotic square of Algirdas J. Greimas derived from Aristotle’s square of opposition and also to be found in Buddhist logic. Louis Hébert says in *Tools for Text and Image Analysis: An Introduction to Applied Semiotics*:

⁶² Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2000).

⁶³ Francis Wheen, *Who Was Charlotte Bach?* (London: Short Books, 2002) shows that Bach was born Karoly Hajdu (1920-1981) who lived as a woman and wrote pseudo-scientific works on evolution arguing that sexual identity was the key force in evolution. The British writer Colin Wilson, who knew her well, described her as a “Messiah figure.” See Colin Wilson, *The Devil’s Party: A History of Charlatan Messiahs* (London: Virgin Publishing, 2000), p. 151.

The semiotic square, developed by Greimas and Rastier, is a tool used in oppositional analyses. It allows us to refine an analysis by increasing the number of analytical classes stemming from a given opposition from two (e.g., life/death) to four – (1) life, (2) death, (3) life and death (the living dead), (4) neither life nor death (angels) – to eight or even ten.⁶⁴

The idea of an element that is *neither A or B* is, of course, an indicator of creativity, of something from the unknown. This can be further highlighted if we take B as *not-A*. And we argue that ‘the fourth’ is a viable description of the esoteric. Just to make a further jump in involving an insight from a widely separated field of discourse, we cite the Sufi injunction to the person on a spiritual quest (which is actually echoed in Gurdjieff’s fourth way or spirituality in life and with roots in Christianity): ‘Be in the world but not of it’.

We now want to extend our picture of the fourth beyond fourfold structure to a general case of the creative term of *all* number-based systems. We have already seen its instantiation in the case of the three-term system or triad, when a new element arises to connect and transcend two terms which are in conflict. Creativity arises from conflict when there is an independent but related third. This was a central idea in Gurdjieff’s teaching, what he called “the Law of Three.” His pupil, John Bennett, extended Gurdjieff’s way of thinking to the successive systems – tetrad, pentad, hexad, heptad and so on – and just as Gurdjieff said, concerning the triad, that people are “third force blind” so Bennett spoke of a progression of operations or kinds of action proper to evolution or progress in which each step is a new and unforeseen beginning.⁶⁵ Note that by associating these operations with creativity, we are largely detaching ourselves from any particular theistic belief. If we have a system of N terms, then there will be a term, the Nth, which may be thought of as the sum or product of all the other terms (there is a set such that all its members contain all the terms except itself).

We have described only the general idea and must emphasise that there is no rigid formula. If we associate systems with finite structures and a certain number, then what we have called the ‘creative term’ can be taken to instantiate the *transfinite*, a limitless source. A teacher of creative design, Edward Matchett, commissioned by the British government to investigate genius, came up with a *5M equation* that exemplifies an esoteric approach being brought into the prevalent technical culture. He developed the formulation of this idea over many years, but its basic form was “Making Media-Plus-Matter Meaningful in the Moment” (Media + Matter = Meaning).⁶⁶

‘Media’ represented the unknown, spiritual reality, the transconscious and so on. Matchett believed this was an ever-present reality. Meaning corresponds to what we have been exemplifying as *systems*. Previous to this, Matchett had developed precise and complex methods of design he called *Fundamental Design Method* but saw his equation as a major

⁶⁴ Louis Hébert, *Tools for Text and Image Analysis: An Introduction to Applied Semiotics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

⁶⁵ Anthony Blake, ‘A Critical Essay on the History of Science’, *Systematics*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1965). At: <http://www.systematics.org/journal/vol3-1/HistoryOfScience.htm>.

⁶⁶ Darrell Mann, ‘TRIZ, Pirsig and Making Media Plus Matter Meaningful in the Moment’, *Altshuller Institute for TRIZ Studies* (2010). At: <https://www.aitriz.org/documents/TRIZCON/Proceedings/Mann-TRIZ-Pirsig-and-Making-Media-Plus-Matter.pdf>.

breakthrough to a more true and direct way. The main idea we want to keep in mind is that of a source that, while being transcendental, is able to address *the needs of human life*.

Kinds of Influence

Many ‘ordinary’ people, even without any particular affiliation to a proclaimed ‘esoteric school’ or spiritual practice, feel that there is more than ordinary life, and that influences come into the world which cannot be explained by ordinary means. Up until recent times this was taken for granted by the majority. To a large extent, such beliefs were fostered and taken care of by what we call ‘religion’ or thought of as superstition.⁶⁷ An important feature of elitist esotericism, as it is usually understood, is that it claims there is a community of sorts that holds the keys to what is true and real and effective, and that goes beyond what is manifest in general human culture. There is a diversity of descriptions for this community or ‘inner circle’: in Christianity, the communion of saints; in Theosophy, the Masters in the Himalayas; and in the Fourth Way of Gurdjieff, the Sarmoung Brotherhood.

Gurdjieff’s description starts with a relatively abstract scheme of *A, B and C influences*. There is, to our eyes, a definite structural correspondence between Gurdjieff’s model and Matchett’s equation. Gurdjieff speaks of A influences as those which are in life and have no intelligent direction. C influences come from beyond life (some commentators take this to mean extra-terrestrial intelligence) but it strictly means influence coming from a community that is not confined by the laws of the ordinary world and has a *mission* concerning the evolution of humanity. Between these two are the B influences, which are, for example, works of art that carry within them the seeds of C influences. Interestingly, Matchett advocated attention to music as a kind of transmitter of ‘media-signals’. It is also significant that both Gurdjieff and Matchett seem to take it for granted that the higher influence is beneficial and *wants to help*. They also emphasise that the help given is towards what is *truly needed*, and thus differs from the pseudo-solutions that people come up with that tend to cancel each other out or produce more harm than benefit.⁶⁸

The esoteric or C influence is the converse of the entropic and inertial character of the exoteric or A influences. In the terms of his cosmological scheme, John G. Bennett proposed that C influences came from what he called the *hyparchic future*, capable of overcoming the decays of time. This was a more sophisticated way of describing ‘where’ the inner circle operates from, locating it in a higher condition of *future time*. In doing this, Bennett was concerned with his vision of a dramatic and uncertain universe requiring creativity and redemption going beyond any timeless pattern. The idea of higher intelligence being ‘ahead of the game’ is ingenious but elusive. It has been reflected in science fiction, as in the recent Hollywood film *Interstellar* (2014), in which the ‘advanced extra-terrestrial culture’ promising to save humanity on Earth from extinction turns out to be ‘future humanity’.⁶⁹ In an earlier film, *La Jetée* (2009), desperate remnants of humanity find a way to contact future wisdom

⁶⁷ Michael Bergunder, ‘What is Esotericism? Cultural Studies Approaches and the Problems of Definition in Religious Studies’, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, vol 22, no. 1 (2010), pp. 9-36.

⁶⁸ Blake, ‘Understanding What is Esoteric’, p. 10.

⁶⁹ Matt Zoller Seitz, ‘Intersteller’, *RogerEbert*, 3 November (2014). At: <https://outlook.office.com/mail/deleteditems?msalAuthRedirect=true>.

through a man capable of 'strong mental images'.⁷⁰ The film itself is a strong mental image! This leads to a way of expressing C influences as 'future influencing past,' which idea has been discussed in modern physics and literature alike.

In speaking of someone capable of strong mental images, we can bring to mind both a modern example such as physicist Paul Dirac, who conceived of anti-matter after three years of intense 'meditation,' and also a quite different exemplification in the poet William Blake, for whom imagination was the supreme divine gift in us. We suspect that, in Blake's world, imagination would concretely involve past and future, giving a different order of perception; hence his prophetic books. In one of his many and varied speculations in the 1960's, John Bennett proposed that amongst the children to be born at the end of the twentieth century would be those gifted with *an expanded present moment* and that, possibly, they would help humanity overcome its short-sightedness.

Bennett makes a distinction between the 'psychostatic' (the vast majority, some of whom appear to be awake and purposeful but are not) and the 'psychokinetic' (those who 'work on themselves' and seek to *change within* more than effect changes without) classes of society and labels the inner circle 'pyschotelios' (those who have arrived and have no need of search). The scheme is similar to the Chinese Triad of Heaven, Man, and Earth but probably stems from the writings of the gnostic Valentinus on hylic, psychic and pneumatic humanity respectively.⁷¹

The role of the psychokinetic person in Bennett's model seems to echo archaic myths of the Hero's Quest as discussed by Joseph Campbell. Like the hero, psychokinetic human has to undergo ordeals or disintegration in order to be able to assimilate something new in which knowledge and being are as one (a Gurdjieff ideal), and s/he is therefore able to *truly help* the society in which s/he lives. It seems apparent that efforts by 'sleeping man' to improve things inevitably lead to some other problem, as has been endless portrayed in ancient teachings about such things as karma and samsara, and features in its typically intense way in Greek drama. And, as Friedrich Nietzsche put it in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (we paraphrase): mankind is a polluted stream and one must be a 'superman' not to be polluted by it.⁷²

In one of its most abstract forms, we find the idea that the person who can respond to or communicate with higher intelligence is able to act in a *triadic* way instead of in a *dyadic* way. Gurdjieff says in his mythological book *Beelzebub's Tales* that one of the most disastrous ideas that arose on earth was that of Good and Evil.

The Meaning is in the Middle

We have mentioned various what we call elementary forms of understanding related to the archetypal numbers two, three, and four. As pointed out by Alister Fowler in his study of Elizabethan forms of poetry, *Triumphal Forms*, the ultimate or prime element can be portrayed

⁷⁰ Brian Dillon, 'Fade Away', *The Guardian*, 28 March (2009). At: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/mar/28/chris-marker-la-jetee-film>.

⁷¹ Gilles Quispel, 'The Original Doctrine of Valentinus the Gnostic', *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 50, no. 4 (1996), pp. 327-352.

⁷² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common (1999), Chapter 5. *Project Gutenberg*: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1998/1998-h/1998-h.htm>.

either at the top of the hierarchy or alternatively, in the middle.⁷³ In the Jewish symbol of the menorah, for example, the central element can be given most significance, reflecting the notion of man being poised between spirit and matter. In ring composition, this element is called the *turn*. There, it is a dramatic element, a locus of choice and uniqueness.

To adopt a rather sweeping generalisation, most esoteric sources portray human existence as having to play the role of the middle in the cosmic scheme. In the Gurdjieffian Triad of A, B, and C influences, we can attend to the middle term, B, as most representative of the human essence. Gurdjieff put it in his inimitable and insightful way: “Blessed is he who has a soul, and blessed is he who does not, but woe unto him who has it only in conception.” To which we can add that the ambiguity of B influences cannot be considered merely as a deficit but might well be regarded as the real crux of the situation.

The motif of Heaven above, Humanity in the middle, and Earth below plays out in myth, but also in some logical schemes. Again, to cite Gurdjieff, a cosmos (or meaningful whole) is to be understood by the threefold relation of its meaning in regard to: 1) what is above; 2) what is below; and 3) what is itself. In terms of the relation with itself, we have reflexivity and the emergence of self-knowledge, concepts crucial to the approach of the fourth way. In this middle element, we must strive to be conscious while this very consciousness can create a barrier to what is higher. Confronting, going into, abandoning oneself to, the realisation of the self, understanding the self, and so on can be seen in various guises: in the first, it is to hold together higher and lower; in the second it is to begin again, to create something entirely new (as Paul says: “a new heaven and a new earth”). In an enigmatic statement by Bennett, it is said that ‘man decides God’.

This is more or less what we face now. Most people today do not consciously believe in a Higher. What is esoteric is recognised more in such things as mathematics where, for example, only a few people out of the billions inhabiting the Earth can begin to understand some new theorems. The ideas of spiritual minorities look quaint, or akin to science fiction. Indeed, one might say that science fiction and esoteric spirituality are kindred, and we should speak of just imaginative fiction which is merging with technology.⁷⁴

A proposal here is that any genuine act of immediate investigation – that is, without splitting oneself in any way or following any explicit method – carries within it both the exoteric and the esoteric, and may be called upon to articulate what either of these two mean. We said, “without splitting oneself” in the spirit of Frank Brentano, who was so influential on pioneers in many fields in the early twentieth century. He argued that in thinking, there was not only the thinking as an experience, but also awareness of the thinking. This had considerable influence on the emergence and evolution of phenomenology.⁷⁵ It contrasts greatly with the postulates of Gurdjieff to the effect that we do many things, inwardly as well as outwardly, but are often, and indeed perhaps mainly, not aware of them. His practical method of self-observation is directed towards the realisation of just that.

⁷³ Alister Fowler, *Triumphal Forms: Structural Patterns in Elizabethan Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 [1970]).

⁷⁴ Mark Cole, ‘Separated at Birth? Occultism, Science Fiction, and Why People Can’t Tell Them Apart’, *Clarke’s World*, issue 162 (2020). At: https://clarkesworldmagazine.com/cole_03_20/.

⁷⁵ Frank Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973 [1874]).

In his book on Gurdjieff’s teaching, *In Search of the Miraculous*, Ouspensky talks about the significance for him of encountering Gurdjieff’s idea of self-consciousness. Gurdjieff asserted that most people do not recognise it or grasp it, and Ouspensky verified that his intellectual friends assumed that they had it as a matter of course. Gurdjieff went on to explain that people do not work to develop true consciousness because they assume they already have it. Gurdjieff’s idea of true self-consciousness is one of the most esoteric formulations of the twentieth century.⁷⁶ This turns out also to address a deep-rooted question concerning understanding. It is taken for granted that any intelligent person can understand what they read or hear, even if they must take some time to do so; for example, they may have to look up the meaning of some words or gather some other information. Rarely is it observed that it is necessary to *undergo some inner change*, to engage a special ontological component, and not just apply memory and reasoning. In the esoteric domain this is not so. There it is widely recognised that something needs to happen in the seeker or reader that will enable her to grasp the message. In a wider sense, Gurdjieff observed that there was a big difference between wishing to be something or understand something and *being able* to do so. Being able is ontological, not just epistemological and entails a change in being.

There is a middle ground in proposing that one needs to be in a certain state in order to understand something. What is meant by the words ‘certain state’ can be usefully identified with work of the emotional centre. In his discussion of reading scripture in the chapter on “Religion” in *Beelzebub’s Tales*, Gurdjieff remarks that it is necessary to have the right corresponding emotions. John Bennett observed that when Jesus takes his disciples up a mountain to reveal some teaching to them, this means they must ascend in their emotions to the place that Gurdjieff called the higher emotional centre.⁷⁷ Even if one does not accept Gurdjieff’s framework of ideas, it is permissible to argue these days that emotions play a critical part in enabling us to understand and create in any field. The emotions can be seen as crucial exemplification of the slogan the meaning is in the middle. Here the word middle refers to the middle of us which, surely, can be said to be a matter of feeling.

A useful pair of terms that can be found in Sufic lore are *hal* which means ‘state’, and *ilm* which means ‘knowledge’. It is recognised in some schools that both are necessary for understanding. It is even hinted that the two must *correspond* to each other in order to produce some required result. This idea stands in contrast with usual behaviour in which we see people studying and acquiring knowledge on the one hand, and people employing practices to bring them into different states on the other, but very little of their meaningful fusion. This may parallel the uncertainty of connection and mutual meaning between the left and right sides of the brain.⁷⁸ Though we are using vague terminology it is important to suggest that there is a capacity beyond the ‘holistic’. Here we adopt the convention that the left brain is linear and analytic while the right brain is holistic and synthetic. What is crucial is represented in the brain by the *corpus callosum*, the realm of interchange between the two sides.

⁷⁶ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 142.

⁷⁷ Joseph Azize, ‘Sentimentality: A Disease of the Feeling’, *Under the Sun*, 29 August (2017). At: <https://www.josephazize.com/2017/08/29/sentimentality-a-disease-of-the-feeling/>.

⁷⁸ Michel Boivin, *The Sufi Paradigm and the Makings of Vernacular Knowledge in Colonial India* (Cham: Springer, 2020).

At the end, the dichotomy of esoteric and exoteric continues to operate. Many people would accept the significant role that feelings play in understanding subtle matters; but many would also reject having to undergo any special what we will call *ontological practices*. For example, very few people would take it upon themselves to become aware of their breathing while they are reading an important text.

The great Persian mystic, Rumi, spoke of developing new organs of perception. He added that evolution comes out of necessity and then advocated, “Increase, then, your necessity!” Today we face the prospect of making changes in human nature through biogenetics and artificial intelligence, and it is unclear what is driving this. One of the values of the approach usually labelled as ‘Fourth Way’ is that it turns matters back to the individual: it is up to each one of us to discover a way of unfolding what is esoteric in us. There is the telling rider: we are an elite only for ourselves.⁷⁹

Three Esoteric Modes of Understanding

We have referred to two components of the esoteric – *hal* and *ilm* in Sufism, being and knowledge in Gurdjieff, inner and outer in general and many other pairs of terms – but there is a third factor. This has to do with the intentionality of the individual, which is not a given. In standard philosophy, especially since Brentano, intentionality is ascribed to any and every act of consciousness. We want to reserve it, however, for real *acts of will*. Acts of will are *possible* for humans, only. In *actuality* we may be likened to mechanisms, having no individual will. These are esoteric ideas, vividly illustrated in the writings of Gurdjieff. We can postulate that the right combination of *hal* and *ilm* can open to a true act of will. In postulating this we are in effect defining what the esoteric really is about. The precise correspondence and coalescence of being and knowledge gives us the presence in us of will as *understanding*. To refer again to Gurdjieff, he writes in *Meetings With Remarkable Men* of his meeting with a Catholic priest, Father Giovanni, who insists that *faith is a matter of understanding* and describes it in terms of a fusion of certain kinds of knowledge with personal experiences.⁸⁰

In the context of what Gurdjieff says, faith is that which ‘moves mountains’, which has the meaning of will. The conflation of these various abstract terms shift from regarding the esoteric as concerned with knowledge or awareness towards seeing it in relation to the active core of our individuality. If we see the world differently than we can act differently. But an act of will can never be a result of anything else: it has the character of the miraculous. It has no value as an explanation. It is only an *indication* and can rightly be construed as an act of faith: there is a circle of meaning and somewhere in this circle we *say* there is a free beginning.

In part because it cannot be derived from either thought or experience, a characteristic of the third element of the esoteric is *simplicity*, in the spirit of T. S. Eliot’s line: “a condition of complete simplicity (costing not less than everything).”⁸¹ Simplicity here echoes mediaeval ideas of higher spiritual reality. This is not simplicity as opposed to complexity, and not

⁷⁹ G. I. Gurdjieff, *Views From the Real World: Early Talks in Moscow, Essentuki, Tiflis, Berlin, London, Paris, New York and Chicago As Recollected by His Pupils* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975).

⁸⁰ Anthony Blake, *Meetings With Remarkable Men* (n.d.). At: <https://www.anthonyblake.co.uk/PLACES.pdf>.

⁸¹ T. S. Eliot, ‘Little Gidding’, *Columbia University* (n.d.). At:

<https://www.columbia.edu/itc/history/winter/w3206/edit/tseliotlittlegidding.html>.

wholeness as opposed to diversity. Statements of will may often appear banal and trivial as, for example, in the words of the apparitions of Mary. Goethe is reported to have said that *only that which everyone knows is true*. This seems the antithesis of the esoteric view; but it is an utterly esoteric statement. Its reference to 'everyone' makes it extraordinary. Obviously, people differ in their knowledge and, not so obviously, people differ in their being. It is only in the will that people can be said to be *equal*. The realisation of this can be counted as an esoteric secret.

Esotericism belongs to a narrative in which there are secret things hidden from the majority. Leaving who is hiding what from whom and for what reason, or whether it is entirely due to *Deus Absconditus* (God hides) or that truth must disguise itself, we can discern different ways in which the esoteric is hidden, and different modes of unfolding or coming to see it.⁸² Following our discussion, we now propose a model of three basic modes. They fall into a progression from outer to inner, with the final mode manifesting unity of seeker with truth.

1. Functional – Calculation

For hundreds or thousands of years the majority of people could not have access to information that was written because they could not read. Today, the vast majority do not have access to advanced mathematics or physics for much the same reason. They cannot read the material in its original form. Like mediaeval people gazing at the images shown in churches and cathedrals, they must rely on pictures given - these days - in television documentaries; but the reasoning process and actions at the core of discovery is rarely considered or experienced.

In the first mode, an effort is required to pass from an external or surface order to an internal deeper one. This basic move has been discussed in the context of physics by David Bohm, especially, who speaks of going from the *explicate* to the *implicate*.⁸³ But it is an obvious feature of such an art as music: in broad terms, there is an order most people can *hear* but, behind this manifestation lies an order relatively few can grasp. Plato, echoed later by Boethius, regarded the music composed of mathematical relationships as higher than that produced by the playing of instruments and the audition of the public. The Sufi Rumi likened the contrast to that between gazing in the shop window and getting into the workshop inside. The transition from external to internal order is *technical*. That is why we use the term 'calculation' in the heading of this section. We gave as an example the underlying structure which Lévi-Strauss discovered in his analysis of storytelling in South America he called the *canonical formula* governing its transformations.⁸⁴ Mathematically, this is known as a *Klein group* which plays an important role in quantum theory. Part of the fascination of this example is that the story tellers themselves had no idea of the mathematical underpinning of their art!

We speak of 'inner' order, but it might be better to use terms like 'integrating' or 'encompassing'. In regard to this, we remark that the history of the idea of esotericism in the last centuries has followed a master idea of the hidden unity of diverse or divergent elements.

⁸² Michael Bennett, 'Esoteric Knowledge: Why It's Hidden and Why It Might Change Your Life', *Medium*, 7 October (2024). At: <https://medium.com/@Mbennettsr/esoteric-knowledge-why-its-hidden-and-why-it-might-change-your-life-e503f4c1c269>.

⁸³ David Bohm and Basil Hiley, *The Undivided Universe: An Ontological Interpretation of Quantum Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁸⁴ Lévi-Strauss, 'The Structural Study of Myth', *passim*.

This is evidently the case respecting religions. It seems unlikely that we can ascribe such a concept to times before there was a collision of different religions around 2000 years ago; this figure reflecting the creation of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam in particular. There were places where all of them co-existed.⁸⁵ We postulate that, as a consequence, intelligent people sought a way of ascribing them all to a *common source*, such as a transcendental unity, or such figures as Guenon's *Lord of the World* or the Hindu *Dattatreya*. This quest paralleled that in science reaching for a fundamental unity amidst diverse phenomena, such as gave rise to the fundamental category of *energy* to surpass that of matter. One of the baffling things in physics is the incompatibility of relativity theory and quantum mechanics. It seems that a totally new theory is needed to integrate them into a whole. Yet, no advance has been made in uniting gravity with the other three fundamental forces.

It is important to note that any attempt to create or define a unitary origin or source - for the diverse religions for example – is tantamount to creating a new one. (This is prefigured in the metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead, where the ‘many seen as one’ become ‘another one’).⁸⁶ A quasi-historical approach has been to make *shamanism* the global origin of religions; a kind of reductionism. And there are the esoteric theories of origins of culture such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak's *The Arctic Home of the Vedas* (1903), which was later developed by John Bennett in his theory of four great cultures created in centres led by higher intelligences which, incidentally, prefigured the discovery of Gobekli Tepe as the ‘temple’ of the agricultural revolution, or the legends of Shambhala (as discussed by Rene Guenon in *Lord of the World*).⁸⁷

The more radical thought is that, besides the evident experience we have as separate subjects, looking out into a diversity of subjects and points of view, there is a perspective or ‘experience’ *from and of the totality (the All, the Encompassing) itself*. Calculation gives us approximations to this global view, such as in relativity theory. However, in its essence, it is beyond calculation *and itself cognizant*. Since this implies another order of subjectivity, the idea of higher intelligence arises and it is this intelligence that really constitutes the esoteric, not any construct erected to approach it. We might call this the esoteric view of the esoteric in contrast with the exoteric view. The exoteric view requires us to make complex efforts but the esoteric requires no *recognisable* effort at all.

It is likely that there are ideas that are so complex that very few can grasp them; this is most evident in the field of advanced mathematics. Some scientists now speculate that there are problems so intractable that *no* human being can ever solve them. Memory capacity and speed of information processing seem to be critical. It is possible that in the future AI may make discoveries which are beyond our comprehension because it can draw on powers of computation that are, as far as we are concerned, without limit. AI can be seen as the modern equivalent of alien or angelic intelligence and is being cast in the role once ascribed to the spiritual beings who were believed to initiate human cultures.

⁸⁵ Livia Gershon, ‘The Deep Roots of Mughal Tolerance’, *JSTOR Daily*, 2 August (2024). At: <https://daily.jstor.org/the-deep-roots-of-mughal-tolerance/>.

⁸⁶ Ronald Desmet, ‘Alfred North Whitehead’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2022). At: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/whitehead/>.

⁸⁷ Bal Gangadhar Tilak, *The Arctic Home in the Vedas* (London: Arktos Media Ltd, 2021 [1903]).

In the first mode of the esoteric the seeker needs to: know a great deal; be able to remember and hold in mind a great deal and find connections between apparently dissimilar things. From the personal correspondence of Carol Robinson to Jane Heap:

Question: What is the advantage of stating a method by parable instead of by fact?

Answer, Gurdjieff – “I bury the bone so that the dog, if he smells it, must scratch for it.” “And deep, so that with much scratching, understanding comes.” G. also says, “plenty of keys in the book, but I never put a key near the lock.”

It is often argued that the difficulty of esoteric texts is put there deliberately to aid the reader by making him work on decoding them. It is even hinted that it is the working through the obscurities that actually yields the hidden message. This may remind us of the classic work by the Sufi Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*.⁸⁸ His story of the ‘Simurgh’ – the thirty birds – describes them going through all kinds of struggles and ordeals to arrive, depleted in numbers, lame and halt, dirty and exhausted at their supposed destination, only to be told that *they themselves* are what they seek. But, as we shall see, this example actually takes us into the second modality of the esoteric, where something has to happen to *the seeker himself*. Understanding comes from work or an action: effort has to be applied for a serious period of time. Yet, however strenuous and demanding the action may be, it still can be undertaken as a task outside of oneself, as something external, as a calculation. It can involve analysis, discussion, meditation and so on, any of the intellectual skills. Inevitably, it leads into an uncertainty because an esoteric text, almost by definition, will have multiple interpretations.

2. *Being – Suffering*

Gurdjieff used the term ‘being-efforts’ to describe what corresponds to our second modality. We want to distinguish being from function. Bennett has defined being as ‘degree of inner togetherness’ and Madame Ouspensky, also a pupil of Gurdjieff, gave the practical definition of being as ‘what you can bear’. In our discussion we have mentioned the idea of ‘ontological disciplines’; and also the idea of the necessity of raising the level of emotion before we can begin to understand a class of esoteric ideas. In this context, we think of emotion as concerning how we relate to ourselves, as in Bennett’s definition of being as ‘degree of inner togetherness’.

Gurdjieff made much of the phenomenon of our fragmentation whereby we have tantamount to myriad personalities each with their own thoughts and feelings and sensations largely unaware of each other. He claimed that if they could *meet* the experience it would be unbearable for most people; but that the state of feeling everything we could feel *all at once* would give us true conscience. It is an extraordinary thing for a human being to see *the truth of himself*. This encompasses both fact and value. Gurdjieff said this experience was an action in *the higher emotional centre*. Sufi mystical texts say: *He who knows himself knows his Lord*.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Farid Ud-din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds* (London: Penguin, 1984).

⁸⁹ Hülya Küçük, ‘Commentary of the Saying “He who knows himself, knows his Lord” from the Angles of Sufism and Anatomy’, *Journal of the Institute for Sufi Studies*, vol. 1, issue 1 (2022). At: <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/taed/issue/71645/1137710>.

Various what we have called ‘ontological disciplines’ are germane. These include fasting, breath control, ordeals and, generally, sacrificing oneself. Fasting is the most widely known.⁹⁰ Its relevance to deepening perception derives from the principle that suspending automatic expenditure of energy in some function such as digestion can make it available for an intentional experience. The great icon painters – to give an allied example – would fast before they began their work. But the most interesting instance of the principle we invoke is the practice of *epoché* that Edmund Husserl introduced as a basis of phenomenology: by putting habitual judgments embodied in experience ‘into brackets’ a new gestalt can emerge. One can see the world in a new way.

We mentioned the icon painters. It is not uncommon for suffering to be made use of in conscious and creative work. Gurdjieff himself talks of this in his ‘confessions’ that composed his Third Series of writings, *Life is Only Real, Then, When I Am*. His grief over the sufferings of his wife and mother became ‘fuel’ for producing his writings. In this regard, we speculate that the esoteric might possibly appear in what is created – the icon, the poem, the music, and so on – and so be made manifest. In a minor fashion, I can attest to the relevance of breath control in understanding the depth of a text. I have recorded Gurdjieff’s writings and found that their demands on my breathing made my rendering of their meaning more intense.

Ordeals play a significant role in many traditions. In our western tradition we find Greek dramatists attesting the necessity of suffering, as Aeschylus said, *No man comes to wisdom save through suffering*. Gurdjieff’s treatment of suffering was not simple. In his writings and talks he emphasised the role of *intentional* suffering, insisting that in English this word be used in contrast with ‘voluntary’. He pointed out that people would go through all sorts of pain and privation to get what they want. He also pointed out that people can, and often are, *attached* to their suffering and should learn to *sacrifice their suffering*. He linked this to being able to help others.⁹¹

The etymology of the word ‘suffering’ includes that of ‘allowing’ as in Jesus’ invitation *Suffer little children to come unto me*. As applied to a person seeking to come into an understanding it can mean *allowing something to be done to or in oneself*, i.e., undergoing an action. It is most vividly expressed in Rumi’s writings where he avers people have to be *cooked* in order to approach the truth of God. The second esoteric mode signifies a realisation based on a change of perception involving a *reorganisation* of the individual in their *being*.

An elusive but critical part of Gurdjieff’s ideas is embodied in the term ‘objective’ which crops up in relation to morality, science and art. In our reading, ‘objective science’ means that science which encompasses a significant change in the being of the scientist himself. It is in being that he can truly comprehend *wholeness*, which *cannot be known*. It has always struck us as strange that modern philosophy has abandoned any sense of the thinker/ reader having to come into and sustain another level of what is usually called ‘consciousness’, whereas this had

⁹⁰ This is still in practice today, although fasting can be interpreted as not just giving up meat and wine or food entirely, but “fasting from self-centred and self-serving ideas.” See Peter Pearson, *A Brush with God: An Icon Workbook* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2005), pp. 11–12.

⁹¹ Joseph Azize and Steven J. Sutcliffe, ‘Only This Will Bring Results’: Practising Gurdjieff’s Exercises in a Search Culture’, in *Intentional Transformative Experiences: Theorizing Self-Cultivation in Religion and Esotericism*, eds Sarah Perez, Bastiaan van Rijn, and Jens Schlieter (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2024), pp. 97–120.

been paramount in Plato, for example. We equate change in being with suffering. It is what makes learning real, an integral part of an individual, what he or she *is*.⁹²

3. *Will – Immediacy*

As we have implied, a common factor in the range of the esoteric, especially on the intellectual side, can be simply defined as *going from twoness to threeness*. The ramifications of this move are vast and would need tomes ranging over the whole range of human thought and experience to articulate. But a useful hint is to be discovered in Gurdjieff’s saying, *man is third force blind*. A practical response to this saying is, when confronted with a duality, to ask after *what is missing*. This might well be taken as a fundamental principle of thinking in its positive sense of *active intelligence*.

The principle or strategy of going from two to three was a deep-rooted issue in medieval Scholasticism, based as it was on the Aristotelian duality of *Form* and *Matter*. In one sense, these two were so radically distinct that it became difficult to see how they might unite, as they were supposed to do to make existing things. Duns Scotus (1266-1308) was one of the Christian philosophers who, unconsciously or not, paralleled the ideas of the Jewish mystic and poet Solomon ben ibn Gabirol (1021/2-1057/8), Avicebron to the Christians, in saying that something different again must act to unite the two. For Scotus, it was called *haecceity* or ‘thusness’ which brought about the *concrete individual* (individuality had been ascribed before just to the limitations of ‘matter’). In Avicebron’s thought, the third factor was *will*.⁹³ If we return to Arabic Sufism, the third factor for realisation on the path was *aml*. Idries Shah specifies the three factors as: ILM + HAL + AML. *Aml* is usually translated as ‘work’ which fits well with Gurdjieff’s usage of the word. The word *aml* can also be translated as ‘action’. Since we are dealing with many historical threads of meaning, it is relevant to cite the two different meanings of these words in modern physics.

Work is defined as *force* times *distance* which gives a picture of *sustained effort*. *Action* is defined as *energy* times *time* and is usually thought of in terms of the principle of *least effort* – or, really, that the action should be a minimum. Least action gives us a way of understanding the coherence of physical phenomena. The simpler concept of work gives the impression of ‘blind’ change; whereas action is connected with the final state as well as the initial one. Action integrates all possible paths between the initial and final states. That is why it fits well with the appellation of immediacy. It easily segues into our understanding of *will*. Will means an integral connection between past and future very different from causality. This can be practised as in John Bennett’s ‘decision exercise’: once decided ‘it is so.’⁹⁴

We want to connect the third factor not only with action, not only with will but also with *understanding*, to which Bennett gave the description of the ‘subjective aspect of will.’ Gurdjieff was often at pains to contrast understanding with knowledge. One of his many explanations was that understanding is *what you can do*. In a nutshell, knowledge is not enough,

⁹² G. I. Gurdjieff, *Life is Real Only Then, When “I Am”* (New York: Penguin Arkana, 1999 [1974]).

⁹³ Sarah Pessin, ‘Solomon Ibn Gabirol [Avicebron]’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition). At: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/ibn-gabirol/>.

⁹⁴ Joseph Azize, ‘J. G. Bennett: Sunday Talks at Coombe Springs’, *Under the Sun*, 2 December (2019). At: <https://www.josephazize.com/2019/12/02/j-g-bennett-sunday-talks-at-coombe-springs/>.

experience is not enough, and we have to *make it happen*. According to Bennett's enquiry, in will there need not be any difference between one and many. It is in this way that the seeker need not be different from what he seeks, infinite though it must be.

Most accounts of the esoteric, because they are in the public domain to a degree, lie in the ambiguities of Gurdjieff's B influences. In the extreme we can call these accounts *exoteric*. Our third mode of the esoteric can be equated with an *esoteric view of the esoteric*. In the literature it is hinted that, in the end, there is nothing to discover, because the quest is identical with discovery and s/he who discovers. Descartes' method of doubt did not go far enough because it can be seen that the act of doubt itself answers the doubt. This is to aver that doubt is only possible because of a *prior certainty*. Doubt and certainty are usually viewed as *mental functions*, but are *acts of will*. Doubt and certainty are related by understanding.

Understanding is too often identified with some kind of mental comprehension, such as by making a picture or fitting new data into an already established schemata. Gurdjieff, instead, linked it to *what one can do*, just as Madame Ouspensky linked being to *what one can bear*. Bennett called it 'the subjective aspect of will'. A will operates in relation to other wills. This makes relatedness fundamental to understanding and why, for example, forms such as *equations* are sometimes invoked as expressions of the deepest understanding (for example, Matchett's 3-M equation, discussed above).

Such ideas should be further explicated by discussions far exceeding what is possible here. Instead, we can only quote a passage from Bennett's *The Dramatic Universe, Vol IV*, the Preface, which highlights the uniqueness of an individual's understanding but, at the same time, its integrality with a cosmic view, the view of the Whole by the Whole (as was suggested by the title of Gurdjieff's writings: *All and Everything*, originally so it is said *All of Everything*).

All experience is contained within the Present, so each separate will determines a Present Moment that is unique. It follows that there must be as many 'Systems of the World' as there are Individual Wills. By the principle that wills coalesce to form Greater Present Moments, systems of explanation can also coalesce; but they cannot be simplified, in the way that has been so often attempted, by reducing them all to a common denominator. This is why systems that start from universal principles alone, fail to give any satisfactory account of individual experiences, especially of individual wills.⁹⁵

The Dramatic Universe itself can be regarded as an esoteric text. We can see it as a revelation of the meaning of the will which is the very core of each individual *but does not exist*. It contains much on science, philosophy and history but the essence is in the reader. It might be taken as the culmination of Christianity far beyond the Protestant revolution where intermediaries such as priests no longer stood between individuals and God, to a new covenant in which people no longer *themselves* stand between.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ J. G. Bennett, *The Dramatic Universe*, Volume IV (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1966), p. vi.

⁹⁶ Joseph Azize, 'Gurdjieff Theologos', *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts, Cultural Histories, and Contemporary Contexts*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2021), pp. 237-260.

The Interplay of Esoteric and Exoteric in Culture

Given the dichotomy of exoteric and esoteric, we can suppose there are four categories of human culture. These categories provide a framework for our final discussion.

esoteric	esoteric
esoteric	exoteric
exoteric	esoteric
exoteric	exoteric

In this scheme we are applying an ancient method of ‘mixtures’ in which two extremes or contrasting qualities are mediated by two states of combination. We cast the two terms at each level in the form of, first *subject* as point of view and, second *object* as what is regarded.

The last *exoteric-exoteric* can be taken as ‘normal’ culture with no acknowledgment of any hidden realities, alternative states of consciousness, or higher intelligence. From an esoteric angle it is the world of “sleeping humanity.”⁹⁷ The level above, *exoteric-esoteric*, is the external perception of the esoteric. It is fairly evident that humanity contains a variety of beliefs and modes of perception. Systems arise to codify these within various cultures. The elements labelled ‘esoteric’ may often contain modes of thought that are no longer in the mainstream of a culture. People who favour them regard them as assets worth preserving for the future because they believe they contain something which the ‘modern’ lacks and is needed for some supposed wholeness of society. They then can be believed to be ‘eternal’ or transmitted over long periods of time through secret societies or such. Teachings claimed in this way to be antique are often quite recent, fabricated to appear ancient, as with Kabbalistic texts written around the twelfth century but claimed to go back to the time of Moses.⁹⁸

Another form this estimation of esoteric materials can take is in their guise as *exotic*. This is much the case with the narrative that expresses the idea that the ‘East’ has ‘inner realities’ the ‘West’ has lost. It is amusing to think of there being a trade between East and West, exchanging technology with meditation! All this is very much a case of an *exoteric view of the esoteric*. It reifies ideas such as the place of the ‘inner circle of humanity’ as an actual place to be found in the Himalayas, for example.

At the contrasting level: *esoteric-exoteric* is to see within the products of culture deeper truths than are generally considered. In this category we might well include the deeper readings of music which, metaphorically at least, reveal a transhuman intelligence. But there is a new strand of esoteric interpretation that takes *movies* as its material. Certain films are obvious candidates for philosophical interpretation; Alain Resnais’ *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) would be an obvious example. However, it is primarily in the genre of science fiction that esotericism takes hold. A supreme example would be Stanley Kubrick’s *2001 A Space Odyssey* (1968).⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Charles Tart, *Waking Up: Overcoming the Obstacles to Human Potential* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1987 [1986]).

⁹⁸ Marla Segol, *Word and Image in Medieval Kabbalah: The Texts. Commentaries, and Diagrams of the Sefer Yetzirah* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁹⁹ Sarah K. Balstrup, *Spiritual Sensations: Cinematic Religious Experience and Evolving Conceptions of the Sacred* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

There is then the belief that fundamental truths are carried in us unconsciously. The esoteric, then, is the hidden knowledge in ourselves. A modest example of this belief is the idea a few physicists have that physics arises from within our bodies, and only secondarily through experiment and reason. Such an idea highlights the esoteric content that is concerned with *origins*. It is clear that traditional occult narratives about our evolution are quite at variance with contemporary evolutionary biology. Questions about our origins meld with questions about our future. Heidegger might say we are thrown into existence and have to make our way as we choose but it would help to know *how* we were thrown. And *why*? This was Gurdjieff ‘burning question’: *What is the sense and purpose of life on Earth, especially human life?*

Now we come to the level *esoteric-esoteric*. It is not surprising that much of the esoteric revolves around the possibility of knowing about origins in a ‘better’ way than science does. Which leads us back to Gurdjieff’s *purpose*. Clearly, such a question invokes the thought of a *higher will*. Which in its turn invokes the question of what is the relation between ‘higher will’ and our own? It is this which we would choose to identify and label as an *esoteric view of the esoteric*. It can only be addressed *through our own acts of will*.

Our usual mode of thinking about will presupposes a *separate agency*. It supposes a separation between seeker and sought as much as between seekers. It is difficult to suspend these entrenched beliefs. The Ch’an tradition offers some support by its idea of *transmission outside the scriptures* and, even more so, of *transmission outside the mind*. It relieves us of the delusion that the esoteric or ‘higher’ ‘hidden’ truths are the property of any one person, group, tradition and, to be entirely outrageous, any one species!¹⁰⁰

Any kind of *study* of the esoteric must, almost by definition, be situated in the exoteric perspective. An esoteric approach to the esoteric must, by implication, *start from the esoteric*. This parallels the idea that wholeness cannot be understood through constructs of parts. We have suggested that an esoteric approach to the esoteric must involve what we have called *ontological disciplines*.

The level we call *esoteric-exoteric* is particularly significant as where an ‘inversion’ of understanding takes place. It is as if we go from the outside looking into the inside looking out. At the middle of the fourfold scheme there is implicit an inversion or ‘turn’ just as we found in the system of ring composition. We might remember Rumi’s example in which in the one half or side concerned how things looked to man, whereas the other side or half concerned how they looked to God. In the strong esoteric view, the disciplines established in universities, for example, are inadequate to understand what is involved.¹⁰¹

We would suggest that the esoteric involves *special means* and it is this that marks out what is esoteric.

1. Clairvoyance: perceptions not conditioned by space-time-causality
2. Transcendental method: actual consciousness of *how* to think in different ways

¹⁰⁰ Anna Sokolova, ‘Esoteric, Chan and Vinaya Ties in Tang Buddhism: The Ordination Platform of the Huishan Monastery on Mount Song in the Religious Policy of Emperor Daizong’, *Buddhist Studies Review*, vol. 37, no. 2 (2021), pp. 219-239.

¹⁰¹ Elham Ghazazani and Amir Abbas Alizamani, ‘A Comparative Study of Martin Buber and Rumi on God-Man Relation’, *Religious Inquiries*, vol. 3, no. 5 (2014), pp. 83-95.

3. Secret language: understanding another kind of communication

There are also certain general features of esoteric content:

1. It is transcultural: not restricted to the world view or ethos of any particular culture but understanding the essential nature of humanity
2. It is global in space and time: united over history and geography
3. It is not contained in thought: it concerns what is prior to any concept or image.

To enter the realm of the esoteric, we have to suffer. In the extreme formulation, we have to die. We cannot simply 'add on' to what we know and perceive and believe; our foundation, our being has to change, and this will cost us. But the literature tells us that when we arrive we then discover there is no change after all. The essential action is to sacrifice illusion. In that sense it is 'scientific'; but science largely works by the suspension of assumptions which may have been held for millennia. There is a severe antithesis between science and the esoteric. This largely stems from their divergence in method. Nevertheless, in another sense they converge.

Initiates of New Formation

When Gurdjieff scathingly spoke of people who say, 'who cares what ancient savages thought?' he had cause. More than a century later, people's perceptions of the past have changed radically. There is a widespread appreciation of 'ancient wisdom' though its details may be disputed. Solid research into the scientific and technological achievements of the ancients is strong, and does not sit well with the fringe science attributing civilisation to aliens, for example, or superior powers of thought to Neanderthals.¹⁰²

One of his most important elements has been the decoding of ancient languages. This may be viewed as the secular equivalent to Gurdjieff's portrayal of initiates able to spot anomalies in ancient productions and read them for special information. Instead of identifying 'deviations from law' in an esoteric sense, a modern researcher will identify a recurrence such as similar symbols in different contexts and use this as a point of departure for establishing a vocabulary as a basis for translation.

The old idea of initiative tends to support the belief in special mental powers with mystical overtones. The modern researcher works hard through making hypotheses and testing them by means of elaborate analysis and calculation, but his methods are explicit. An enormous amount of legwork is involved: the late American physicist Richard Feynman pointed out that most people who have ideas about physical reality different from the norm rarely 'put the work in' to justify their claims.¹⁰³ We can now do things to authenticate texts that were not doable before, such as using computers to analyse word frequencies to identify authors. The analysis and reading of ancient texts, in whatever form, depends on having a wide-ranging database which has been accumulated through years of effort involving many people. Modern information technology has provided us with manifold tools to do this, tools that were not available hundreds of years ago. This leads us to mention the theatre of memory, a method

¹⁰² Ronald H. Fritze, *Invented Knowledge: False History, Fake Science and Pseudo-religions* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009).

¹⁰³ Richard P. Feynman, *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out* (New York: Basic Books, 2023).

that dates from at least 2000 years ago; a technic that enables a great deal of information to be assembled and interconnected. As Erik Davis in *Techgnosis* observes, such occult practices anticipated modern techniques.¹⁰⁴

Concerning the reading of ancient texts, it is useful to cite the exemplary case of Lévi-Strauss and his ‘canonical formula’. Though not ancient, the stories from South America Lévi-Strauss analyses represent an ‘alien’ culture for us; yet he was able to discern a mathematical pattern in the transformations of such stories that, first of all, the people of the region would never understand and, secondly, which mapped into such modern ideas as quantum mechanics (using the properties of a Klein group).

Mathematics is now facing a new challenge in terms of understanding proofs. This has two faces: in the one, we have the new phenomena of proofs produced by artificial intelligence which are proving too complex for humans to understand and thus verify; in the other, we have exceptional mathematicians such as Shinichi Mochizuki producing proofs that are hundreds of pages long and so dense that (so far) no one else can understand them. The world of artificial intelligence is capable of surprises, as a recent demonstration of mastery of the game GO in which the computer made a move inexplicable to seasoned players, it proved crucial to moves made later.¹⁰⁵

Besides speaking of modern information technology and mathematics, we should consider the relation between the conscious and unconscious mind. It is being increasingly realised that we are not aware of nearly all so-called mental processes. They use a language that is not known to our conscious minds. This is suggested by Ignacio Matte Blanco, who argues for a logic of the unconscious we can approach through mathematical thinking.¹⁰⁶ Over a period of several years I made video conversations with Gordon Lawrence about his method of the *social dreaming matrix*. In his view, there are messages coming through to us ‘from within’ mediated by dreams but liable to be blocked, distorted and forgotten. The scheme exactly agrees with the classical Hindu model in which our waking state is the *lowest* form of consciousness and dreamless sleep the highest. This counter-intuitive picture is found also in J. G. Bennett, specifically in his book *A Spiritual Psychology*. Lawrence’s method supports the exchange of dreams of people to discover new lines of thought.¹⁰⁷

The theme of forgetting is important. For example, by and large most people have no memories from before the age of three, and often little before the age of seven. In any development, the process by which the important things of life are learned get forgotten. Thus, we learn how to read but have no idea how we managed it! I believe this is true for every major step of capability we make. Such a step gives us something valuable to use in the material and social worlds, but we do not understand how we acquired it and, therefore, are unable to

¹⁰⁴ Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic, 2015).

¹⁰⁵ Steve Borowiec, ‘Google’s AlphaGo AI defeats human in first game of Go contest’, *The Guardian*, 9 March (2016). At: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/mar/09/google-deepmind-alphago-ai-defeats-human-lee-sedol-first-game-go-contest>.

¹⁰⁶ Ignacio Matte Blanco, *The Unconscious as Infinite Sets: An Essay in Bi-logic* (London and New York: Routledge, 1980 [1975]).

¹⁰⁷ John Godolphin Bennett, *A Spiritual Psychology* (USA: Bennett Books, 1999 [1967]).

consciously steer ourselves into the unknown, or the ‘undiscovered country’ as Kathryn Hulme put it.¹⁰⁸

Remembrance and Renewal

Remembering can be understood as far removed from repeating the past. It can also mean to *re-member*, or put ourselves back together in a new way. Traditional esotericism plays an important role in reminding us of knowledge and perceptions that have become lost in the surface noise of contemporary culture. One is tempted to think in terms of cycles of perspective. The collectives seem to swing between different states of equilibrium, or stabilised attitudes of mind that may stretch across thousands of years. This has been speculated about in terms of mental epochs. In Bennett’s view of history, the idea was fleshed out by characterising an epoch as a period of more than two thousand years in which humanity on a global scale centred on a particular view of the world. For example, the last two and half thousand years, so he averred, centred on the greatness of man, the *megalanthropic* epoch. Transitions between epochs are portrayed as *traumatic* and parallels are drawn between the phenomena of individual, collective and historical traumas, foremost among which is the repression of memories.¹⁰⁹

Gurdjieff’s phrase ‘remember yourself’ is usually taken to mean getting into some higher state but it is more than that. It is to restore oneself as a whole, to include things which one has forgotten. In our age memory is neglected because of our reliance on machines and verbal language. This makes it more than impossible to understand ancient cultures and thus, ultimately, ourselves. A recent book *The Memory Code* offers a concrete and practical entry into the world of pre-literate memory and what it meant. As a Gurdjieffian would appreciate, the author, Lynne Kelly, approaches her material through her own practice and development of ancient mnemonic devices, that is, by *doing*. Her contacts with many indigenous people have taught her about levels of initiation and the arising of elites *based on knowledge* in contrast with the elites that grew with settlement and accumulation of goods which were and are based on *wealth and power*.¹¹⁰ Without any knowledge of Gurdjieff, she understands that the kind of knowledge carried in memory schools of pre-literate peoples is ‘three-brained’, involving not only thought, but *necessarily* sensuality and emotion as well. She notes that dances can contain precise information on techniques – such as in the manufacture of iron, as an example – just as Gurdjieff averred – as in his example of a country dance that ‘contained a recipe for jam’.

In brief, Kelly gives us a picture of the *esoteric* based on actual contemporary practices which have their roots in pre-literate times. She gives a concrete account of levels of initiation. But the important thing is that the knowledge carried and transmitted in ancient memory codes *cannot* be understood in terms of verbal language. We can, however, gain access to this non-verbal knowledge by working on developing an organic kind of memory, a kind that has been obscured and even repressed by modern cultures and education. It is not mystical, but supremely *human*. Our minds, bodies and worlds are then made of the same stuff. To regain

¹⁰⁸ Kathryn Hulme, *Undiscovered Country: A Spiritual Adventure* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1966).

¹⁰⁹ John Godolphin Bennett, *The Crisis in Human Affairs* (UK: Hermitage House, 1951).

¹¹⁰ Lynne Kelly, *The Memory Code: Unlocking the Secrets of the Lives of the Ancients and the Power of the Human Mind* (London: Atlantic Books, 2017).

this early kind of memory we have to create and move in the physical world with boundless curiosity, just as Gurdjieff seems to have been saying.

The Memory Code is a manifestation of a supremely important ‘new’ understanding of the esoteric, belonging to the twenty-first century, that beings back or ‘remembers’ the ‘old’ in ourselves and may help to heal the shattered mind of our age. According to much esoteric teaching or mythology, this is a recurrent pattern due to the fact that in going through any real change of mind on a global scale, we will fall into confusion and need to remember to remember.¹¹¹

The End of the Esoteric

The recovery of lost knowledge that appears there is a growing appreciation of ‘other kinds of experience’; particularly, one might say, emotional and physical. There is no case I am aware of was some uncovering of ancient or esoteric knowledge has led to anything significant in real work today, for example in science. We might except the example of archaeology taking mythology and literature seriously. An interesting case is that of what was called ‘Vedic mathematics’, published and taught by Swami Tirtha. It turned out that the sutras cited were fakes, written by Tirtha to support his claims. ‘Vedic mathematics’ was in fact a modern invention. Yet it did have the merit of encouraging the psychological experiential approach to doing mathematics, something that is increasingly acknowledged in modern teaching.¹¹²

One might as well equate apparent esoteric knowledge with dream work, imagination and fiction, or which are valuable in creative work as *points of departure* but do not give any explicit information beyond what is already known. To put it simplistically, the esoteric seems to be no more than a suggestion of connections between things which are not currently established or believed to be connected in the mainstream. This is beneficial for keeping the mind open and exploring. One of the haunting questions behind the idea of the esoteric is, if there is some real, possibly *effective* knowledge (as contrasted with outdated quaint belief) accessible from somewhere (the pre-historical past, aliens, angels or any of the possible sources I cite in my book on the subject *A Gymnasium of Beliefs in Higher Intelligence*).¹¹³ Can we identify this source, and can we *make use of it*? The question requires us to understand what usage might mean. A typical response is to say that this ‘knowledge’ might help me personally transform rather than lead to anything like scientific knowledge; though some may believe that such knowledge can help save the world. Gurdjieff was smart enough to deliberately obfuscate any attempt to clarify what esoteric knowledge might consist of.

In the search implied by the esoteric is the idea that we can access the source of wisdom or insight that is not conditioned entirely by habits of thought and belief. This entails putting our usual experience into brackets as in the aims of phenomenology. In the cycles of history, two trends can be discerned. Firstly, it is widely supposed that what we call religion, science and art were relatively recent separate domains and institutions and cut off from an

¹¹¹ Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 2000 [1976]).

¹¹² C. K. Raju, ‘Nothing Vedic in “Vedic Maths”,’ *The Hindu*, 12 May (2016). At: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/nothing-vedic-in-vedic-maths/article6373689.ece>.

¹¹³ Anthony Blake, *A Gymnasium of Beliefs in Higher Intelligence* (UK: DuVersity Publications, 2010).

early primordial state of mind in which they were not divided. The cause of the holistic is a recurrent theme of esoteric studies in contrast with the more modern trend of looking to extreme specialisation for what is truly out of the ordinary or beyond current conditioning and belief. We have often cited contemporary physics as an example and, historically, the supreme character of Isaac Newton realistically stands for magic being taken into science perhaps rather like the very early mysteries being taken into public religion. We must remark that many representatives of the esoteric tend to disparage modern science and fail to appreciate the remarkable creativity and unity which it has revealed.¹¹⁴

The other tendency, of quite a different nature, concerns the last two millennia in Western culture that started with the Greek elitism of intellect and dominated the church for 1000 years. After that time, in the high medieval era, a current of devotion and heart-centred consciousness arose, not only in the West but also in, for example, in India. In recent times, particularly in the twentieth century, there emerged a further shift of perspective that led to the body, movement and sensation for its spiritual content. Typically, Gurdjieff embodied this shift, for example in the Movements. His pupil Bennett claimed this to be ancient, but he may well be mistaken or, rather, he was following the marketing technique of projecting significant innovation into a 'recovery of ancient wisdom'. The recent move to respect and investigate the intelligence of the body parallels the wealth of new knowledge of the body that has come from biological science. And, to add here as significant recent discovery, the evidence of vast numbers of alien cells in our bodies is set to transform our sense of human identity.¹¹⁵

It may seem a silly question but at least it is an important one: Who what is in charge of discoveries? When Alice Bailey wrote *The Externalisation of the Hierarchy* (1957) it marked, even as a work of fiction, a shift in perspective which had echoes in many other ideas such as the claim that the higher powers, who had previously been responsible for human evolution into the beginnings of history, were so to say handing over responsibility to us.¹¹⁶ It is common in general discussions about human evolution to say that this process is now in human hands, and no longer 'natural' (we might think of Nietzsche's dictum that *the nature of man is to be unnatural*). The esoteric perspective of Alice Bailey supposes that in earlier epochs only a few initiates were capable of access to higher intelligence. That is no longer tenable.

But what are the equivalents to the hidden powerhouses for Shangri-Las of the past in our modern times? Is it that universities and laboratories across the world can be said to represent the agencies of discovery? All attempts to pin down scientific method fail. Creativity flourishes by *the company of creative people*. It is the putting together of people that counts. We should not discount the possibility of a *global mind* that has been speculated about for at least 100 years. This would be an actualisation of the widespread belief that superior people are in telepathic rapport with each other, only it depends now on technology rather than any psychic powers. In this regard, we should mention Vladimir Vernadsky, father of biospherics, who believes that a new sphere was being born, the *noosphere*, primarily through technology, in contrast with Teilhard de Chardin's religious view.

¹¹⁴ Jole Shackleford, 'Western Esotericism and the History of European Science and Medicine in the Early Modern Period', *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis*, vol. 20 (2008) pp. 173-203.

¹¹⁵ Pauline de Dampierre, "Sacred Dance: The Search for Conscious Harmony. Interview with Jacques le Vallois." *American Theosophist*, vol. 73, no. 5 (1985), pp. 175-181.

¹¹⁶ Alice Bailey, *The Externalisation of the Hierarchy* (New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 2015 [1957]).

It would seem to us that science claiming to know *all* that is true is rather short-sighted and that the esotericist who claims s/he has superior knowledge is delusional. We have a desperate need to understand ourselves and what we are doing and, at best, the esoteric can only serve to give us a little jolt every now and then by its typical critique of modern culture.

As an epitaph we present the words of Peter Brook on Shakespeare speaking of him as one who totally embraced the esoteric and the ordinary, the high and the low, spiritual and material in one amazing human reality.¹¹⁷ Prospero in *The Tempest* recognises that within nature, before you get into the world of the cities and the courts, there is something that is called magic. Magic is used ruthlessly for power, both by Prospero as well as by those who want to murder him. Prospero's wish for revenge has tainted his mind, and he is hell-bent—literally hell-bent—on revenge. His deepest qualities emerge and make him recognise what is beyond revenge. So, he breaks his wand and he drowns his book. He gives it all up to return to being a simple human being. At the very end of the play, he asks for a prayer (again this isn't Shakespeare, it is Shakespeare through Prospero speaking of a prayer) that “pierces ... mercy itself.” This is a prayer that is so sharp with clarity that it is like a needle, or a blade, that leads us to what may be the last word Shakespeare wrote—‘free’.¹¹⁸

And in ‘free’ are found all these aspects of the human outer and inner nature that completely cloud us from a sense of what a natural order could be. ‘Freedom.’ It can resonate in us in a way that brings together all the different levels of a unique ‘something’ called the *Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Works that contain all the esoteric teaching in the world. But not through a teacher preaching. Every moment is to be discovered and rediscovered, but not, however, by sitting at home and reading, because there again one would be betraying the real function of writing for performance. We should discover this every time the words and the characters are brought to life for us, and with us, in performance.¹¹⁹

The Esoteric Aspect of Information

The idea of the esoteric came from ancient practices of an elite who were distinguished by their knowledge. In the development of written language, particularly of the alphabet three thousand years ago, the esoteric became transposed into special, secret and cryptic texts. Divisions between the esoteric and the exoteric are rules of thumb which affect the norms of communication. At a deeper level, lies the pervasive intelligence of *language* itself. Gadamer's often cited statement: “being that is understood is language”, and Rosenstock-Huessay's discourses on grammar and reality, also Giambattista Vico's insistence that it is language, not us, which is intelligent indicate what we mean. Language is the medium in which the world and selves – the out there and the in here and the between – meets in relationships. Memory codes are, above all also, languages. Cave paintings are languages (possibly even of astronomy). The invention of the alphabet and the introduction of zero changed the world.

¹¹⁷ Peter Brook, *Tip of the Tongue: Reflections on Language and Meaning* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2017).

¹¹⁸ William Shakespeare, ‘The Tempest’, *Folger Shakespeare Library*, Act 5, ‘Epilogue’. Lines 15-20:

“And my ending is despair/ Unless I be relieved by prayer/ Which pierces so that it assaults/ Mercy itself, and frees all faults./ As you from crimes would pardoned be/ Let your indulgence set me free.” At: <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/the-tempest/read/5/EPI/>.

¹¹⁹ Brook, *Tip of the Tongue*, pp. 97-99.

‘Languaging’ is the great work which inexorably continues. In Ezra Pound’s translation of the *Analects* we read the essence of this work:

they sought precise verbal definitions of their inarticulate thoughts [the tones given off by the heart]; wishing to attain precise verbal definitions, they set to extend their knowledge to the utmost.¹²⁰

In spite of how it might appear, every saying is a prayer or act of participation in the dialogue of nature, man and God. I view science as a modern form of revelation. One extraordinary facet of this says been the progression of understanding from matter, to energy, to information. On reflection, is easy to map these steps to ancient forms of thought such as the *gunas* of Samkhya: matter to *tamas*, energy to *rajas* and information to *sattvas*; but the progression in science as being revolutionary for our understanding of the natural world. Still barely registered amongst people, the revolution of information is extraordinary and radical.

When Gurdjieff said, nothing exists but matter and energy, he was certainly echoing the German materialists and philosophers of *kraft und stoff* but he was omitting the play of what he called ‘cosmic laws’. In his cosmological schemes and myths these sometimes appear as ‘acts of God’ (who just as some modern physicists talk of deciphering the mind of God in their search after a theory of everything) but, strangely enough, he describes to his Endless Creator only the role of modifying these laws. In his reflection on Gurdjieff’s cosmologies, *The Dramatic Universe*, Bennett drew on the idea of *dimensions* as they appear in modern physics. He was haunted by the power of number since encountering Gurdjieff’s persistent calling on the law of three and the law of seven throughout his teaching life. Bennett saw a need to de-restrict the law of number from just three and seven to all integers, arguing that any number has a characteristic meaning in the way it could organise the stuff of experience.¹²¹

It was as if he felt the attraction of the emergent revolution of information as the third category in the scientific all-embracing view of the natural world, in addition to matter and energy. David Bohm, who met and talked with John Bennett, spoke of ‘active information’ rather in the sense of organising the unfolding of matter and energy. But another fundamental aspect of information is that it ‘organises itself’, which is sometimes spoken about in terms of considering the universe as a computer. Bennett had seen a way of depicting dimensions such as space and time as conditions of existence as forms of limitation. He considered them to arise from the self-limitation of will (an idea obviously resonant with the Christian postulate of *kenosis* or privation that is embedded in the tradition of the incarnation of God as man).

Conclusion

Besides self-limitation we are free to consider the possibility of self-transcendence. A stark way of expressing this is to claim that information entails free will. It is important to appreciate that the idea of matter that dominated the seventeenth century has almost completely

¹²⁰ Ezra Pound, *The Great Digest* (1945), cited in J. Mark Smith, ‘The Sign of the Translators: I. A. Richards, Ezra Pound, and “Debabelization”,’ *Paideuma: Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, vol. 35, nos 1-2 (2006), pp. 179-216.

¹²¹ John Godolphin Bennett, *Enneagram Studies* (Newburyport, MA: Red Wheel/ Weiser, 1983).

disappeared. First through relativity and the revelation of the unity of matter and energy, and now through quantum mechanics where we are discovering the unity of energy and information. Ideas and images hanging over from early classical science cannot serve us well in coming to grips with the nature of information. It is not to be found in objects, nor even in the idea of field which arises from the category of energy.

These ideas are emerging in surprising ways, and I cannot do more than refer to them in a skeletal manner. My general claim is that the category of information radically alters the discrimination between the esoteric and the exoteric. I must emphasise the significance of giving information a *physical* meaning. It is not just symbolism or interpretation. It is more than interesting that we can find hints of this physicality in Gurdjieff. He talked, for instance, of ‘weighing thoughts’. I believe that when he, and his pupils such as John Bennett, spoke about *substances* in the cosmos and in ourselves they were in fact indicating the physical reality of information. God’s word, for example, might be an actual substance that sustains the universe! As the desperate escaped replicant leader Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) tells geneticist J. F. Sebastian (William Sanderson) “We’re not computers … we are physical.¹²²

¹²² Ridley Scott (dir.), *Blade Runner* (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros, 1982).